The MANIFEST

A Journal of the Paranormal

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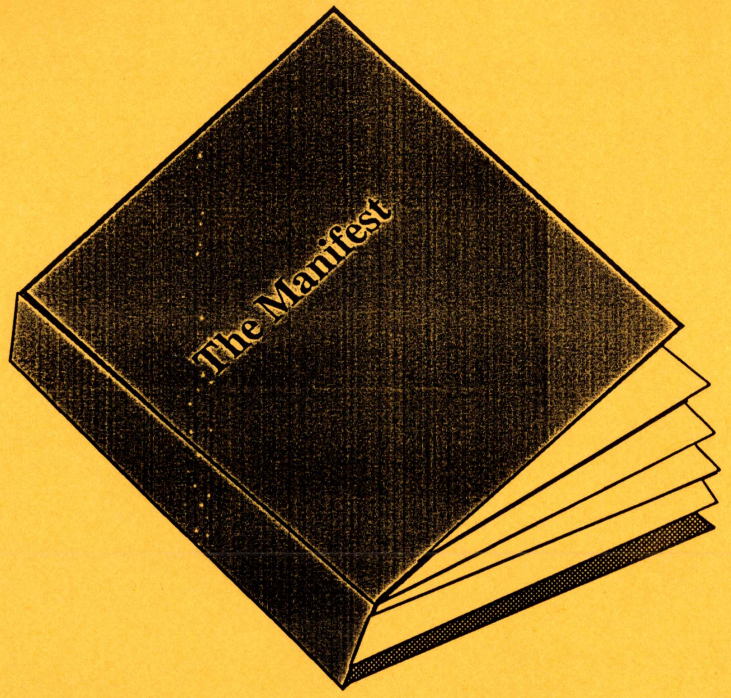

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The Manifest #1
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* Edited by Kathryn A. Sullivan.
** Edited by Kathryn A. Sullivan and Joyce Riffle.

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Welcome to issue #1 of **The Manifest.** Several people have asked where did that name come from? Very simply, when I first started planning this zine, I was planning to do a *Friday the 13th — The Series* fanzine (the Manifest of *F13* is the book of cursed objects). As I started putting ideas together, I realized that most of the fandoms that interested me all had a paranormal slant ... and doing a multi-media zine would probably be more fun than doing a zine dedicated to only one show. And Susan Garrett has already done a beautiful *F13* zine (**Curses, Foiled Again!** — SASE to Susan at 14B Terrace Court, Toms River, NJ 08753), so it made sense to broaden the scope of the zine to include a greater variety of paranormal media. So the title stayed the same — I liked it — but the focus of the zine widened to include *Beyond Reality, She-Wolf of London, Shades of LA, Forever Knight,* etc., and original work in the paranormal fiction field.

This zine, and **Trap Open!**, my companion *Real Ghostbusters* zine, are the first zines I've done using computer technology. Especially in the case of **The Manifest**, I've been able to use not only the power of the computer for writing, editing, and formatting, but also the communications power of Genie, America Online and other services to attract contributors and story conference. Kathy Sullivan and I communicated almost daily via America Online's Internet gateway, allowing us to save considerable **$$** on long-distance phone bills between Boston and Minnesota. Tish Wells and Pat Ritter (who sent her story files to me by E-Mail!) are both members of the Genie online family that I met through the SFRT (Science Fiction Roundtable) there. Information and suggestions for "Curriculum Vitae" came from both AOL and Genie, as well as other sources. Unlike any other zine I've done (and in the years since my first zine in 1977, there have been over 30!), **The Manifest** has made good use of the possibilities of electronic communication and computerized power. Watch for the next issue, when more of the Genie-ites make their presence known in the world of the paranormal through the pages of **The Manifest.** Special thanks are due to the contributors, to Kathy Sullivan and Joyce Riffle for their help on editing my stories, and to Cinda Gillilan, James Bow, and Zoe Backman for their assistance on this issue.

This zine was a lot of fun to put together, and I think there is great potential for future issues. It came out a few pages shorter than I expected, but I think what's here is worthwhile. I am definitely planning a second issue for no later than MediaWest*Con 14 (14! Wow!), and possibly as early as Revelcon depending on submissions. Already I've got pieces tentatively promised on *Shadow Chasers, She-Wolf of London, Friday the 13th — The Series, Shades of LA, Beyond Reality, Sapphire and Steel,* and *Seeing Things.* And of course, more in the continuing saga begun in this issue's "Curriculum Vitae." See "Call for Papers" included with this issue for more information on what I'm looking for in the paranormal field for **The Manifest #2.** FYI, there will *not* be a sequel to "Darkheart," although I do hope to write — and publish — more *Forever Knight* fiction next issue.

All of us who've contributed to **The Manifest #1** would love to hear from you — your LoCs not only make us feel wanted, but also help to shape future issues. I'd like to read your criticisms, suggestions, and praises. And don't forget to send in your numbered discount coupon to ensure your copy of **The Manifest #2** at $2.00 off the final cover price. This numbered certificate and the coupon (both signed by me) attached are your insurance that you are purchasing a legitimate Vendredi Press fanzine — you can help fanzines to continue by avoiding bootleg copies of fanzines. What you don't support can die — that's equally true for bootlegging as it is for fanzines.

But most importantly, *enjoy.* There's some fine stuff in this zine, and it is definitely a labor of love. And we'll see you next issue!

Curriculum Vitae

A portfolio of fiction and information by Deb Walsh

This issue:

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Key: *Series Title* (Source of Primary U.S. Broadcast) # episodes (Abbreviation)

Dr. Julianna Moorhouse took off her glasses, laid them carefully on her desk and leaned back in her chair — a hard-won chair and one she cherished as head of the Georgetown Institute's Cultural Studies Department. Behind her lay yet another day of hard work, tasks accomplished, decisions made, and actions taken. Before her lay a pile of neatly stacked folders, each prepared with meticulous attention to detail by her administrative assistant, Liz Watson. Those folders represented to her the fulfillment of a life's dream.

In a little over a year, the Georgetown Institute would play host to a world-class conference of psychic and paranormal investigators and scholars, with herself as chairperson. Like her position at the Institute, it too was hard-won and much cherished. While the Institute's Paranormal Investigations Unit was still comprised of only one full-time person — Doctor Jonathan MacKensie — the Institute's prestige in the area had grown considerably since that day she'd manuevered MacKensie into acting out her own fantasies. MacKensie had published several papers on the subject of paranormal traditions in aboriginal cultures, and had already proposed at least two sites reputed to have supernatural histories for intense study by archaeological and anthropological teams. The current interest in all things "new age" had brought the added benefit of legitimizing her interests in the view of the Institute's Board of Regents, and funding had at last been provided to support MacKensie's investigations. In their last meeting, the Board had approved the use of the Georgetown Institute as the site of this first international congress of the paranormal, approving a not ungenerous budget for these recessionary times. With the resumes of hundreds of possible participants stacked before her, she drew a deep, pleasurable breath and plucked the top folder from the file.

As she read, a small smile played about her lips. Doctor Ian Matheson had developed a considerable academic standing as a debunker of the paranormal, preferring instead to expound theories of a more psychological and mundane cause for things she knew to be of supernatural origin. He had published several books on the subject, and one, *The Face of Fear*, had nearly made the *New York Times* Non-fiction Bestseller List. His next book, *Satan's Sex Slaves* (reputed to be co-authored with his aunt) *had* made the *New York Times* Bestseller List. At a very young age, Matheson had become one of the world's leading authorities in mythology as psychological language; more recently, he'd become a serious contender to Stephen King.

Two years ago, something had happened to Doctor Ian Matheson, something so significant that it had completely turned his point of view inside out. The string of well-researched scholarly books explaining the unexplainable in Freudian terms had suddenly stopped. In their place had come not only the sensationalist books, but articles on the historical origins of myth, especially the myths of transmutation. Matheson had begun to advertise for anecdotes and experiences in the paranormal. Suddenly, the great disbeliever had become a true student of the occult.

Finally, he had even left the world of academe (admittedly the university had announced plans to phase out the Mythology department shortly before Matheson's departure), and now hosted a program celebrating the paranormal in that most supernatural of cities, Los Angeles. His paranormal talk show, *How Strange*, was syndicated in nearly 100 markets. He'd authored several screenplays, all of them either science fiction or horror. He had even, on one occasion, interviewed her nemesis in life, Edgar Benedek, on his show. Benedek had been overwhelmed by Matheson's scholarly approach, his ridiculous shenanigans finding an unreceptive audience. She'd enjoyed that, and the video took pride of place in her collection, her secret vice.

Yes, obviously something of great interest had occurred in Matheson's life to cause so radical a change in his point of view (not to mention taste).

His assistant, Ms. Randi Wallace, also appeared to have undergone a dramatic shift in perspective. The young American had started a not unimpressive academic career along the same lines of Matheson's, yet was now fully supporting Matheson's new focus. She had even abandoned her own academic career to become Matheson's producer on *How Strange*.

Intriguing. Yes, definitely invite them. Since Matheson's twin brother was still an inmate in a Baltimore prison, he could even build something of a vacation around the trip. She jotted a quick note on the cover sheet Liz had so thoughtfully provided, and closed the folder, placing it in the "Yes" pile. With an almost girlish enthusiasm, she reached for the next folder in the pile.

Curriculum Vitae: *She-Wolf Of London/Love And Curses* (syndicated) (20 episodes) (SWL)

Main Characters:
Doctor Ian Matheson: ..... Neil Dickson
Randi Wallace: ..... Kate Hodge

Premise: When American graduate student Randi Wallace transfers from Los Angeles to London to study under her idol, Doctor Ian Matheson, research for her masters thesis takes her to the moors, where she is attacked by a werewolf. On the next full moon, she finds herself transforming into a werewolf herself. When she and Matheson attempt to track down the werewolf who infected her, he is killed, but the "curse" is not broken. Matheson, a firm believer in the non-existence of a true occult, finds himself enmeshed in a world of the supernatural as he and Randi attempt to find a cure. When the University phases out Ian's department, and a friend of Randi's in Los Angeles is killed by trolls, Randi and Ian relocate to California. There Ian hosts a paranormal talk show on KBLA, *How Strange*, while he and Randi continue their search for a cure to Randi's monthly curse.

Characters:
(London)
Mum Matheson: ..... Jean Challis
Dad Matheson: ..... Arthur Cox
Julian: ..... Scott Fults
Aunt Elsa: ..... Dorothea Phillips
(Los Angeles)
Skip Seville ..... Dan Gilzevan

Episode List: (in approximate order of airdates)
She-Wolf Of London
The Bogman Of Letchmoor Heath
The Juggler
Moonlight Becomes You
Nice Girls Don't
The Little Bookshop Of Horrors
The Wild Hunt
Can't Keep A Dead Man Down (parts 1 and 2)
Voodoo Child
What's Got Into Them
Big-Top She-Wolf
She-Devil
Beyond The Beyond
Curiosity Killed The Cravitz
Habeas Corpses
Bride Of The Wolfman
Eclipse
Heart Attack
Mystical Pizza

The file on the Ghostbusters was thick, including newspaper clippings, extracts from *Who's Who in Education, Who's Who in the Paranormal,* and *Who's Who in Physics.* Doctor Spengler had obviously toyed with a career in mainstream physics, and some of his patents were truly groundbreaking. But his interest in the paranormal had resulted in his greatest successes, and effectively removed him from any serious competition for the Nobel Prize for Physics. That most mainstream of all mainstream sciences would never consider someone dabbling in her favorite field for a prize. She smiled.

Doctor Raymond Stantz also possessed a considerable resumé, and his list of publications dated back to his earliest college days. As the most-published of the Ghostbusters, it was amusing that he was frequently the hardest to interview. She knowing at least one reporter who'd been frustrated by Stantz's high distraction quotient, and she wondered just what sort of speaker he might be. Interesting, at any rate. And guaranteed to irritate Benedek — a definite plus in his favor. And apparently, his collection of occult tomes equalled or perhaps surpassed Matheson's.

Peter Venkman. Doctor Peter Venkman. Psychology and parapsychology. Entrepreneur, sometimes called a charlatan. Often the mouthpiece of the Ghostbusters in public appearances. She stifled a giggle. He'd once hosted a Manhattan cable-access program called *World of the Psychic* (utter rubbish), which had been cancelled due to low ratings. Even an appearance by a bestselling author hadn't helped ratings. Yes, Benedek had certainly been outclassed there. Another fine addition to her secret video collection.

Somehow, these three scientists, their assistant Winston Zeddemore (intriguing, that — no history of interest in the supernatural before signing on with the Ghostbusters) and their secretary cum office manager Janine Melnitz had managed to turn the supernatural into a thriving business. Their presentations were reputed to be glossy and informative, and always entertaining, including a "live" demonstration with what they called a "free floating repeater." She'd have to clear the nuclear accelerators with the Physics Department, but she was sure she could manage that.

Yes. The Conference could use someone of their ilk — publicly high-profile, yet with a solid professional reputation. She scribbled a note and laid the folder in the affirmative pile.

Curriculum Vitae: *Ghostbusters/Real Ghostbusters* (syndicated/ABC/USA Network) (130 episodes) (RGB)

Characters:

Doctor Egon Spengler: ..... Harold Ramis/(voice of Maurice La Marche)
Doctor Raymond Stantz: ..... Dan Ackroyd/(voice of Frank Welker)
Doctor Peter Venkman: ..... Bill Murray/(voice of Lorenzo Music/Dave Coulier)
Winston Zeddemore: ..... Ernie Hudson/(voice of Arsenio Hall/Buster Jones)
Janine Melnitz: ..... Annie Potts/(voice of Laura Summer/Kath Soucie)
Slimer: ..... Slimer/(voice of Frank Welker)

Premise: Three college professors (Spengler, Stantz and Venkman) specializing in the paranormal were fired from their jobs at Columbia University. In an effort to make it in the "real world" they opened business as the Ghostbusters, making use of the various inventions and theories of Spengler and Stantz. With their secretary Janine Melnitz and assistant Winston Zeddemore, the trio found themselves facing the reality of ghosts, goblins, and ghouls in the Big Apple.

Episode List: (alphabetical listing only)

Adventures In Slime And Space
Afterlife In The Fast Lane
Ain't NASA-sarily So
Apocalypse — What, Now?
Attach Of The B-Movie Monsters
Baby Spookums
Banshee Bake A Cherry Pie
Beneath These Streets
Big Trouble With Little Slimer
The Bird Of Kildarby
Boo Dunit?
The Boogieman Cometh
The Boogieman Is Back
The Brooklyn Triangle
Buster The Ghost
Busters In Toyland
Bustman's Holiday
The Cabinet Of Calimari
Camping It Up
Captain Steel Saves The Day
Chicken, He Clucked
Citizen Ghost
Cold Cash, Hot Water
Collect Call Of Cthulhu
Copy Cat
Cry Uncle
Dairy Farm
Dead Con I
Deja Boo
The Devil In The Deep
The Devil To Pay
Doctor! Doctor!
Don't Forget The Motor City
Drool, The Dog-Faced Goblin
Egon On The Rampage
Egon's Dragon
Egon's Ghost
Elementary, My Dear Winston
Flipside
Follow That Hearse
A Fright At The Opera
Future Tense
A Ghost Grows In Brooklyn
Ghostbusted
Ghostbuster Of The Year
The Ghostbusters In Paris
Ghostbusters Live From Al Capone's Tomb
Ghost Fight At The OK Corral
Ghosts 'R' Us
Ghostworld
The Grundel
Guess What's Coming To Dinner
Halloween 2 1/2
The Halloween Door
Hanging By A Thread
Hard Knight's Day
The Haunting Of Heck House
The Headless Motorcyclist
The Hole In The Wall Gang
I Am The City
If I Were A Witchman
It's A Jungle Out There
It's About Time
Jailbusters
Janine Melnitz, Ghostbuster
Janine's Day Off
Janine's Genie
Janine, You've Changed!
The Joke's On Ray
Killerwatt
Kitty Cornered
Knock Knock
Last Train To Oblivion
Lights — Camera — Haunting!
Loathe Thy Neighbor
The Long, Long, Long, etc., Good-bye
Look Homeward, Ray
Loose Screws
Lost And Foundry
The Magnificent Five
The Man Who Never Reached Home
Masquerade
The Mean, Green, Teen Machine
Moaning Stones
Mr. Sandman, Dream Me A Dream
Mrs. Rogers' Neighborhood
My Left Fang
Night Game
No One Comes To Lupusville
Not Now, Slimer!
The Old College Spirit
Once Upon A Slime
Partners In Slime
Play Them Ragtime Boos
Poultrygeist
Ragnarok And Roll
The Ransom Of Green Spud
The Revenge Of Murray The Mantis
The Revenge Of The Ghostmaster
Robo-Buster
Rollerghoster
Russian About
The Scarin' O' The Green
Sea Fright
Short Stuff
Slimer Come Home
Slimer Streak
Slimer's Curse
Slimer, Is That You?
The Slob
Something's Going Around
Spacebusters
The Spirit of Aunt Lois
Standing Room Only
Station Identification
Stay 'Tooned
Sticky Business
Surely You Joust
Take Two
They Call Me MISTER Slimer
The Thing In Miss Favisham's Attic
Three Men And An Egon
Till Death Do Us Part
Trading Faces
Transcendental Tourists
Transylvania Homesick Blues
The Treasure of Sierra Tamale
Troll Bridge
20,000 Leagues Under The Street
The Two Faces Of Slimer
Venk-Man!
Venkman's Ghost Repellers
Very Beast Friends
Victor The Happy Ghost
When Halloween Was Forever
Who Are You Calling Two-Dimensional?
Who's Afraid Of The Big, Bad Ghost?
X-Mas Marks The Spot
You Can't Take It With You
You Can't Teach An Old Demon New Tricks

The guest list for the Conference (she was going to have to develop a real name for this event soon) was shaping up nicely. If everyone she'd already vetted agreed to attend, she'd have a solid beginning for the Conference. Pleased with herself, Dr. Moorhouse selected the next file folder from the pile and opened it, smiling faintly to herself.

Ah. Jack Marshak. Once a fairly famous magician, his reputation in paranormal circles was at once both low-key and widely respected. When his father disappeared over a decade earlier, Marshak halted his thriving theatrical career and began to wander the world, apparently aimlessly. His association as a supplier of antiques and collectibles with known devil-worshipper Louis Vendredi was a matter of record, but since Vendredi's death, he had applied himself totally to recovering objects sold by Vendredi. Fascinating. Based on what she knew of Vendredi's reputation, it was likely that those objects had been tainted in some way; he'd been linked to various Satanist cults throughout the Midwest. Marshak's integrity would naturally lead him to remove any questionable objects from circulation. She had seen him give a presentation at a magician's convention several years before, and remembered him as an entertaining and informed lecturer. A definite "Yes."

His associates, Micki Foster and Ryan Dallion, were much younger and had no history of activity in the supernatural. Foster and Dallion were cousins, distantly related to Vendredi, and had inherited his store, Vendredi's Antiques, on his death. Marshak apparently returned from a buying trip shortly thereafter. Together, they immediately renamed it to Curious Goods and embarked on a campaign to recover those antiques Vendredi had sold. So whatever it was, they were involved with Marshak.

Dallion had dropped out of sight a couple of years later, roughly around the time his mother had reappeared after a 10-year absence. Then she dropped out of sight as well. Strange. A new young man, Johnny Ventura, had joined up with Foster and Marshak shortly after his father had been killed in the line of duty. A team with a tragic history, it would appear. And certainly some spine-tingling stories to tell, she was sure.

She made a note in the file to address letters to each of the three current team members, and a further note to do some more digging on the current whereabouts of Dallion.

Curriculum Vitae: *Friday The 13th The Series* (syndicated) (73 episodes) (F13)

Characters:

Jack Marshak: ..... Chris Wiggins
Micki Foster: ..... Robey
Ryan Dallion: ..... John D. LeMay
Johnny Ventura: ..... Steven Monarque
Louis Vendredi: ..... R. G. Armstrong
Rashid: ..... Elias Zarou

Premise: "Louis Vendredi made a deal with the Devil, to sell cursed antiques. He broke the pact, and it cost him his soul. Now his niece Micki and her cousin Ryan have inherited the store. And with it, the curse. Now they must get everything back ... and the real terror begins ..."

Antique-seller Louis Vendredi sold his soul to the Devil and, to serve his master, cursed the antiques in his store. But Vendredi's conscience gets the better of him, and when a child wanted a cursed doll, he tried to renege on his deal with the Devil. The Devil took him, cursing his soul for all eternity. The store, Vendredi's Antiques, was inherited by Vendredi's niece and nephew, Michelle (Micki) Foster and Ryan Dallion. Jack Marshak, an ex-magician and a supplier of objets d'art to Vendredi's store, returned to the store to find Vendredi dead and his objects cursed. In almost every case, the antiques bestow special gifts or powers on their possessors, but the price of the gifts is pain or death to some other person. Together, the trio set out to recover all the cursed antiques. Along the way, they discovered that the objects cannot be destroyed, only contained in a special vault built by Vendredi. When Ryan was killed and resurrected (as a child), his place in the triumvirate was taken over by Johnny Ventura, an old friend whose father was killed by someone using a cursed object.

Episode List: (in order of airdates)

The Inheritance
Cupid's Quiver
The Poison Pen
A Cup Of Time
Dr. Jack
The Great Montarro
Shadow Boxer
Hellowe'en
The Root Of All Evil
Tales Of The Undead
Scarecrow
Faith Healer
Bedazzled
The Baron's Bride
Vanity's Mirror
Tattoo
The Electrocutioner
Brain Drain
Quilt Of Hathor
Quilt Of Hathor: The Awakening
Double Exposure
Pipe Dream
The Pirate's Promise
The Badge Of Honor
What A Mother Wouldn't Do
Bottle Of Dreams
Doorway To Hell
Symphony In B#
Master Of Disguise
The Voodoo Mambo
And Now The News
Tails I Live, Heads You Die
13 O'Clock
Wax Magic
Read My Lips
The Sweetest Sting
Night Hunger
Eye Of Death
The Playhouse
Face Of Evil
Scarlet Cinema
Better Off Dead
The Mephisto Ring
Wedding Bell Blues
The Butcher
A Friend To The End
The Secret Agenda Of Mesmer's Bauble
The Shaman's Apprentice
Wedding In Black
The Maestro
Coven Of Darkness
The Prisoner
The Prophecies (parts 1 and 2)
Demonhunter
Crippled Inside
Stick It In Your Ear
Bad Penny
Hate On Your Dial
Night Prey
Femme Fatale
Epitaph For A Lonely Soul
Mightier Than The Sword
Midnight Riders
Year Of The Monkey
Repetition
The Long Road Home
My Wife As A Dog
The Tree Of Life
The Spirit Of Television
Jack-in-the-Box
The Charnel Pit

Dr. Moorhouse took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes wearily. The sun had set an hour earlier, and she'd been forced to turn on the light at her desk to continue her review of resumés. The "No" pile had grown, full of con artists and charlatans. It was these people who made it so hard to gain credibility in the study of the paranormal — ersatz fortune tellers, counterfeit mediums, fraudulent channellers, phoney witches ... And that didn't include all the peculiar individuals Benedek was always dragging into the cases he usurped from MacKensie. There ought to be a law ...

She put her glasses back on and pulled the next folder. Hmm. Now this was interesting. Detective Nicholas Knight of the Toronto Homicide Division. Raised in Chicago, an avowed archaeology enthusiast — that should please MacKensie. Briefly she wondered if she could pair the two of them on a panel on supernatural rites and archaeology. Knight only worked the night shift, never day. Apparently suffered from some sort of medical condition — an allergy to sunlight! — that severely curtailed his daytime activities, and had only appeared in court during the day on very rare occasions, and under very specific conditions. That would certainly have an impact on what panels she could schedule him for — perhaps she would plan field trips for the day, and panels in the evening? Hmm, an idea that bore consideration. Knight had been involved in several bizarre incidents which defied rational explanation ... and on at least one occasion, worked closely with a psychic in solving a case, although the psychic had died at the hands of the murderer. Yes, indeed — Detective Knight had promise.

Close associates included County Coroner Doctor Natalie Lambert, his captain Joseph Stonetree, and his partner Don Schanke. And a beautiful young woman known only as Janette, proprietress of the exclusive club The Raven. She was equally strange, it appeared.

She held the resumé up and examined it over the tops of her glasses. Nothing conclusive. But definitely something. It might be useful to have a representative from law enforcement. Apparently he had already worked with at least one psychic on an investigation — that in itself would make an interesting topic for a panel discussion. And this Detective Knight would bear watching ...

She scribbled a note to Liz to do a further background check on Knight and to send off an invitation.

Curriculum Vitae: *Forever Knight* (CBS Crimetime After Primetime) (22 episodes) (FK)

Characters:

Detective Nick Knight: ..... Geraint Wyn Davies
Doctor Natalie Lambert: ..... Catherine Disher
Detective Don Schanke: ..... John Kapelos
Janette: ..... Deborah Duchêne
LaCroix: ..... Nigel Bennett
Captain Joseph Stonetree: ..... Gary Farmer
Grace (Coroner's assistant): ..... Sandi Ross

Premise: "He was brought across in 1228. Preyed on humans for blood. But now he wants to be mortal again. To repay society for his sins. To emerge from his world of darkness, from his endless, forever night ... "

800-year old vampire Nick Knight is searching for a way to regain his humanity. A Crusader in Frederick II's capture of Jerusalem, Nicholas the Knight was seduced by beautiful vampire Jeannette, and brought over by her vampire master LaCroix in the year 1228. For many centuries, he travelled the world with his mentor LaCroix and Jeannette. At times, they parted company only to reunite later, until finally Nick decided to pursue his lost humanity. LaCroix, both friend and master to Nick, refused to allow Nick to cross back over, and consistently foiled Nick's attempts to find a cure for his vampirism. Only LaCroix's death freed Nick from this interference. Among his various personas through the centuries have been a field doctor in the Union Army during the Civil War, an Associate Professor of Archaeology at a University of Chicago, and a rock performer at Woodstock. Suffering from the "Dorian Gray syndrome," Nick has had to leave each of his lives behind him as the world grew older around him. Now he is a homicide detective with the Toronto Metro Police, working the night shift with his partner Don Schanke. County Coroner Doctor Natalie Lambert is the only human who knows his secret, and is helping him to cross back over.

Episode List: (in order of airdates)

Dark Knight (parts 1 and 2)
For I Have Sinned
Last Act
Dance By The Light Of The Moon
Dying To Know You
False Witness
Cherry Blossom
I Will Repay
Dead Air
Hunters
Dead Issue
Father Figure
Spin Doctor
Dying For Fame
Only The Lonely
Unreality TV
Feeding The Beast
If Looks Could Kill
Fatal Mistake
1966
Love You To Death

The stack of unread folders was growing smaller, and the reject heap threatened to spill onto the floor. The smallest pile by far was the accepted pile. She leaned back in her chair to consider the possibilities. Well, these were the speakers she was selecting, not the attendees. That would be even more difficult if she hoped to preserve the scholarly tone she planned for the Conference. Advertising this Conference to the right sort of potential attendee would be difficult — especially if Benedek caught wind of it before the sign-up period expired. A Gordian Knot if ever there was one ...

She fished out the next folder, her expression changing from consternation to delight. Professor Laura Wingate. Professor J. J. Stillman. Excellent. Respected scholars in the paranormal field, running one of the finest parapsychology departments in the world out of McGill University in Toronto (she wondered briefly if they'd ever encountered Detective Knight). Their casework was world-renowned, their data base of unusual paranormal activity a gold mine of material. Their investigative techniques were beyond reproach, cited in the most scholarly of journals and used as the basis for many undergraduate papers in the field. Impeccable credentials. Where the Ghostbusters had brought the paranormal into the glaring eye of the media, Wingate and Stillman legitimized it in the halls of academe.

Good people. In fact, Julianna would enjoy spending some time with Laura again, and getting to know this Stillman person. Laura's background in archaeology and anthropology would give her a common ground with MacKensie; in fact, it would be interesting to see if Detective Knight's interest in the subject might dovetail nicely into a panel or talk on the paranormal and ancient cultures. And Stillman's work in psychology might provide some fascinating case studies. Apparently it was experiences with some of his patients that led him to pursue his study of the paranormal. And their academic standing would lend a definite aura of scholarly respectability to the Conference. She was sure that a survey of their contributions to the study and measurement of paranormal activity would be a highlight of the Conference.

A resounding "Yes." She jotted down several exclamation points and closed the folder with a flourish.

Curriculum Vitae: *Beyond Reality* (USA Network) (44 episodes) (BR)

Characters:

Professor Laura Wingate: ..... Shari Belafonte
Professor John Jeremiah "J.J." Stillman: ..... Carl Marotte
Celia Powell: ..... Nikki de Boer
Tom Fairbanks: ..... David Hewlett

Premise: At an unnamed North American university in an unnamed North American city, Professor Laura Wingate chairs the Department of Parapsychology, assisted by her associate Professor John "J.J." Stillman, and their teaching assistant, Celia. At the university, they maintain an exhaustive data base of paranormal reports, legends, anecdotes, and documented incidents, in addition to conducting field investigations. Their casework runs the gamut of the paranormal—hauntings, poltergeist, past-life experiences, astral projection, curses, alien lifeforms, and more.

Episode List: (in approximate order of airdates)

Range Of Motion
The Cold
The Bridge
Black Magic
Enemy In Our Midst
Asylum
Killer Instinct
Mirror, Mirror
The Doppelganger
Miracle Worker
Return Visit
Intimate Shadows
Echoes Of Evil
Sins Of The Father
Nightmare Without End
Master Of Darkness
Siren Song
Justice
The Fire Within
The Color Of Mad
The Burning Judge
Theatre Of The Absurd
Woman Of His Dreams
Nightfall
Dancing With The Man
The Dying Of The Light
A Kiss Is Just A Psi
Late For Dinner
Where There's Smoke ...
Demon In The Flame
Facing The Wall
A Mind Of Their Own
Final Flight
Inner Ear
Dead Air
Let's Play House
The Loving Cup
The Passion
Thanks For The Memory
Face-Off
Keepsake
The Box
Reunion
The Bloodstone

Moorhouse held up the sheaf of papers on Jeff Randall and studied them curiously. Randall, now in his early '60s, had started a private detective agency with his friend Marty Hopkirk in London in the late 1960s. His partner had been killed while investigating a case, and Randall went on to identify and successfully deliver his murderer to justice. His business had limped along through the '70s, until a breakthrough case late in the decade had put Randall on the map, bringing him a higher paying clientele and a few front-page cases. What made Randall worthy of note to her was reports of him speaking to his dead partner, and even incidents of unusual happenings surrounding his investigations. Was it possible that Hopkirk's shade had survived? Had that partnership not ended with Hopkirk's death? Randall had steadfastly refused to be interviewed over the years, and his relationship with the local police had suffered as a result. Too many questions remained unanswered around his cases.

Too many questions. Intriguing questions. She wondered if Randall might be willing to talk to others who believed in the reality of the etheric plane. Surrounded by serious believers (no crackpots allowed!), Randall might end his nearly 30-year silence.

She was curious, she had to admit. Was that sufficient cause to bring an aging man (although she had to admit he was only a decade older than she was) from London to Washington? To probe his secrets? To open up the past? And if the ghost of his partner still haunted him, would that ghost be able to make a trans-Atlantic crossing? She put a question mark in the folder marked "Randall," and set it aside to consider more later. She was intrigued, yes. Perhaps she would write a personal letter to Mr. Randall first to gauge his reaction ...

Curriculum Vitae: *My Partner the Ghost* a.k.a. *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* (syndicated)
(25 episodes) (R&HD)

Characters:
Marty Hopkirk: ..... Kenneth Cope
Jeff Randall: ..... Mike Pratt
Jean Hopkirk: ..... Annette Andre

Premise: Private detective Marty Hopkirk was murdered while investigating a case, leaving behind his partner Jeff Randall and his widow Jean. Following the funeral, Jeff visited Marty's grave, and Marty appeared before him. Marty failed to return to his grave by dawn, violating an ancient rhyme: "Before the sun shall rise on you, each ghost unto his grave must go. Cursed the ghost who dares to stay and face the awful light of day." By remaining out of his grave after sunrise, Marty effectively cursed himself to walk the earth for 100 years. Only Jeff (and isolated psychics) could see him, and together, they reformed their detective partnership in an effort to catch Marty's murderer. When that's done, Jeff was stuck with Marty, and Marty with Jeff.

Episode List: (in approximate order of airdates)

My Late, Lamented, Friend And Partner
A Disturbing Case
All Work, No Pay
Never Trust A Ghost
That's How Murder Snowballs
Just For The Record
Murder Ain't What It Used To Be
Who Ever Heard Of A Ghost Dying?
The House On Haunted Hill
When Did You Start To Stop Seeing Things?
The Ghost Who Saved The Bank At Monte Carlo
For The Girl Who Has Everything
But What A Sweet Little Room
The Man From Nowhere
When The Spirit Moves You
Somebody Just Walked Over My Grave
Could You Recognise That Man Again?
A Sentimental Journey
Money To Burn
The Ghost Talks
It's Supposed To Be Thicker Than Water
The Trouble With Women
Vendetta For A Dead Man
You Can Always Find A Fall Guy
The Smile Behind The Veil

Now this was curious. Another police officer. Was there a connection? Did policemen live so close to the edge that the veil between life and death became blurred? Or was it becoming late and she was indulging in pop psychology?

She shook her head, shaking loose the weariness that was beginning to overtake her. She reached for the small clock on her desk and stared at the time. Nearly midnight. The witching hour. Odd that she hadn't found any resumés of witches among the folders Liz had compiled. She shook herself again. This wasn't finishing the job.

Detective Michael Burton, LAPD. Shot down in the line of duty. Clinically dead for several minutes, but revived by paramedics. Description of near-death experience textbook in detail. The difference with Burton was that he continued to see and speak to ghosts after he recovered.

She tapped her pen thoughtfully against her lower lip. Benedek described much the same experience after the car accident he and MacKensie had. Benedek's connection to the other side closed after the resolution of that case, and she knew that the loss bothered him. As though some part of him was missing. Oh, she must be tired if she was feeling sympathetic to Benedek! She wondered if Burton heard bells when he saw the ghosts?

Medical workup on Burton certified him clean in mind and body. Well-balanced young man, effective in his performance, even inspired at times. Respected member of the force. He just happened to see ghosts. Had he ever appeared on Matheson's show ... no, there was nothing in the file about it. She'd have to ask Liz to try to track down tapes of Matheson's program — there might be some other good leads there.

Well, it would be fascinating to see how he and Detective Knight would get on. That could be a very interesting panel — the use of the paranormal in police investigations. Perhaps she would also invite Benedek's friend Melody — the woman had helped out on a number of police investigations across the country, after all. And if Randall did elect to participate in the Conference, perhaps Burton could also speak with Hopkirk's ghost, if he in fact existed beyond her imagination. Now that would be a treat!

Yes, Burton would make an interesting addition to the speakers' list. She noted this in his folder and added it to the "Yes" pile.

Curriculum Vitae: *Shades of LA* (syndicated) (20 episodes) (SLA)

Characters:

Detective Michael Burton: ..... John DiAquino
Lieutenant Wesley: ..... Warren Berlinger
Annie Brighton: ..... Gale Mayron
Uncle Louie: ..... Kenneth Mars
Mick Santini: ..... Brian Libby
Jack Monaghan: ..... David Crowley
Luis Cedena: ..... David Faraldo
Mark Hobson: ..... David Michael O'Neill
Liz Carmeli: ..... Beverly Leech

Premise: "Los Angeles, California. City of Angels. I love it here. I'm a detective, Metro Division. I had it all. Then one day on a stakeout a flash from a .38 sends me falling, and I'm floating toward the end of a cloudy tunnel. Suddenly I'm in a strange kind of limbo, surrounded by ... ghosts. Some people call them shades, as in not quite alive and not quite dead, but with unfinished business back in their lives. Now, I admit I was more than a little scared, but right then the paramedics yanked me back and I'm among the living. I figured my near-death experience was nothing more than a bad memory. But I was dead wrong. It was only the beginning ..."

Shot down in the line of duty, Detective Michael Burton found himself in the astral plane, surrounded by ghosts. When he awoke in the hospital, he wrote the experience off as an anomaly, an out-of-body experience. His nurse's aide, Annie Brighton, warned him not to tell the doctors since he might end up in the mental ward. She helps him to relax and put the experience behind him. But even after his recovery, he found himself able to see and talk to ghosts — the shades of LA. Those shades looked to Burton for help in resolving the loose ends of their lives, and Burton found himself trying to balance the needs of the living against the needs of the dead.

Episode List: (in alphabetical order)

Big Brother Is Watching
Burial Ground
Concrete Evidence
Cooper's Coroner
Cross The Center Line
Dead Dogs Tell No Tails
Dreams
The Last Laugh
Line Of Fire (parts 1 and 2)
Pointers From Paz
The Really Big Sleep
Send Up The Clowns
Shades Of LA (pilot)
Some Like It Cold
The Teacher From Hell
Ten Little Thespians
Til Death Do Us Part
Where There's No Will, There's A Weigh In
The Wrong Man

Julianna Moorhouse leaned back in her chair and chuckled out loud. Trust Liz! A resumé on MacKensie and Benedek. She would have to include Benedek. Try as they might, neither she nor MacKensie had been able to unload Benedek over the years, and grudgingly she had to admit that he had been a valuable member of the team during those years — he and his odd assortment of "specialists."

Perhaps she would have Benedek put together a panel on the paranormal as entertainment — Zabo and Hortense would certainly fit in there! That might contain him. But how could she do that without him splashing news of the Conference all over the pages of the *National Register*? "Respected university hosts ghouls and goblins — are professors truly blood-suckers?" She could see it now, and her heart sank. A conundrum, no doubt about it. She needed Benedek's contacts, she couldn't afford Benedek's sensational headlines.

MacKensie. She'd put MacKensie in charge of Benedek. Granted, he'd had little luck over the years in containing Benedek, but if she bribed him with a little more funding for that *ramapithecus* research he kept babbling about, she just might get some results. Yes. That was the solution.

Rather than write invitations, she'd meet directly with the pair of them. Give them their jobs for the Conference, and contain their enthusiasm (and Benedek's headlines) through sheer dint of hard work. Because, whether she liked it or not, Benedek had rubbed off more on MacKensie than the other way around. She'd actually caught MacKensie reading the *National Register* not even a week earlier! Not using it for wastebasket liner, but *reading* it. She shook her head sadly. She was beginning to worry about MacKensie — perhaps she ought to fund that *ramapithecus* work he wanted to do anyway, and get him away from Benedek's influence ...

Curriculum Vitae: *Shadow Chasers* (ABC) (13 episodes) (SC)

Characters:

Doctor Jonathan MacKensie: ..... Trevor Eve
Edgar "Benny" Benedek: ..... Dennis Dugan
Jordan "Jordie" Kerner: ..... Avery Schrieber
Doctor Julianna Moorhouse: ..... Nina Foch
Liz (no last name given) : ..... Corky Grazer
Randi (no last name given) : ..... Suzy Gilstrap
Melody Lacey: ..... Hermione Baddeley

Premise: Physical anthropologist Dr. Jonathan MacKensie was railroaded into investigating incidents of the paranormal by his department chair, Dr. Julianna Moorhouse. On his first case, he met tabloid reporter Edgar Benedek. Well-versed in the more sensational aspects of the paranormal, Benedek insinuated himself into this and other investigations, bringing in his own special brand of "specialists" to crack the case.

Episode List: (in approximate order of airdates)

Shadow Chasers
The Spirit of St. Louis
Amazing Grace
The Middle of Somewhere
Parts Unknown
The Many Lives of Jonathan
The Phantom of the Galleria
How Green Was My Murder
Let's Make A Deal
Blood and Magnolias
Cora's Stranger
Curse of the Full Moon
Ahead of Time

Ah yes. Dr. Moorhouse picked up the photocopied articles and looked them over, reliving an old thrill. London journalist Tom Crane's articles on the occult from the late '70s were still considered to be among the best in the field even now — groundbreaking material which had formed the basis for many doctoral theses in parapsychology in the years between. And at the close of that apathetic and self-absorbed decade, he had dropped out of the public eye. He had become involved in investigating a particularly unsavory psychic who had reputedly murdered many of his assistants and adversaries. During this investigation, Crane's own psychic powers had reawakened after many years submerged (he had a history of pre-adolescent poltergeist). His wife had died in a car crash that left Crane grief-stricken and angry. Rumor had it that he had gone to work for a government occult investigation unit, known as "Department 7."

She knew that almost every major power had some sort of psychic investigations unit — some were left to their own devices to explore at scholarly leisure the world beyond the five senses. Others were designed to locate and employ psychics in national security or worse, in espionage. Not too many years ago, she'd heard the horror stories of a dream research laboratory that was being perverted by a shadow government agency, training psychics as assassins on the dream plane. The purpose of Department 7 was unclear, but she trusted that Crane's own innate integrity would have prevented him from joining up and/or staying with an organization specializing in the darker side of intelligence ...

A panel or at least a discussion of the government uses of paranormal research would be a valuable addition to the Conference agenda. An issue of some importance to the psychic research community. And he would present a welcome balance to Benedek's yellow journalism ...

Yes. Invite Tom Crane, and suggest that he recommend some of his colleagues. This could be very informative, indeed.

Curriculum Vitae: *The Omega Factor* (PBS) (10 episodes) (OF)

Characters:

Tom Crane: ..... James Hazeldine
Julia Crane: ..... Joanna Tope
Anne Reynolds: ..... Louise Jameson
Roy Martindale: ..... John Carlisle
Andrew Scott-Erskine: ..... Brown Derby
Michael Crane: ..... Nicholas Coppin
Edward Drexel: ..... Cyril Luckham

Premise: Freelance journalist Tom Crane specialized in articles on the supernatural, and while investigating a notorious psychic named Drexel in Edinburgh, he discovered that he too possessed psychic powers. While combatting Drexel, Crane was drawn into a web of occult horror, and his wife Julia was killed in an automobile accident. Stricken with grief and haunted by recurring images and even sightings of his dead wife, Crane was persuaded by his wife's friend Anne Reynolds to join the Department 7, the government paranormal investigations department she worked for. While working with Department 7, Crane developed a theory of a secret organization using the Greek letter Omega as its name, an organization which exploits psychic occurrences and abilities. He suspected that Omega planned to take over the world using an army of psychics.

Episode List: (in order of airdates)

The Undiscovered Country
Visitations
Night Games
After-Image
Powers Of Darkness
Child's Play
St. Anthony's Fire
Out Of Body — Out Of Mind
Double Vision
Illusions

Carl Kolchak. Now there was a name she hadn't heard for a very long time. Kolchak had achieved some notoriety back in the '70s with a series of unconnected articles on the activities of very specific supernatural beings in American cities. Many had written him off as a crackpot, but she'd met the man and knew him to be sincere. Not only sincere, but ruthlessly truthful. Early conversations with Kolchak had led her to look more closely into the world of the supernatural, and his detailed chronicles of experiences with succubi, vampires, and various other bizarre types had become treasured items in her collection on the supernatural. She knew that even the ubiquitous Benedek admired the old man. When he spoke of him, it was as close to reverence as she could ever hope to hear in Benedek.

Carl had retired several years ago, disappearing into a welcome obscurity. He'd never liked being news himself, preferring to report the news rather than make it. Trust Liz to track him down and add him to the list. But whatever possessed him to take up residence in Oak Forest, Illinois?

She'd welcome a chance to talk to Kolchak again. And she suspected that his body of unpublished work, significantly more complete than the articles he'd been allowed to publish, would attract the attention of every serious psychic researcher on her guest list so far. He was a wealth of information, a skeptic made believer by the constant intrusion of unnatural beings into his life.

Hmm. She seemed to be amassing the beginnings of some fascinating potential panels — the paranormal and law enforcement, journalism and the supernatural, scholarly study of the paranormal ... very exciting.

She noted an enthusiastic "Yes" in Kolchak's file, and placed it almost reverently on the pile of affirmatives. Yes, she'd like seeing Carl Kolchak again. Now, if only she could protect him from the depredations of Benedek ...

Curriculum Vitae: *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (ABC/syndicated) (2 films, 20 episodes) (KNS)

Characters:

Carl Kolchak: ..... Darrin McGavin
Tony Vincenzo: ..... Simon Oakland
Ron Updyke: ..... Jack Grimmage
Emily Cowles: ..... Ruth McDevitt

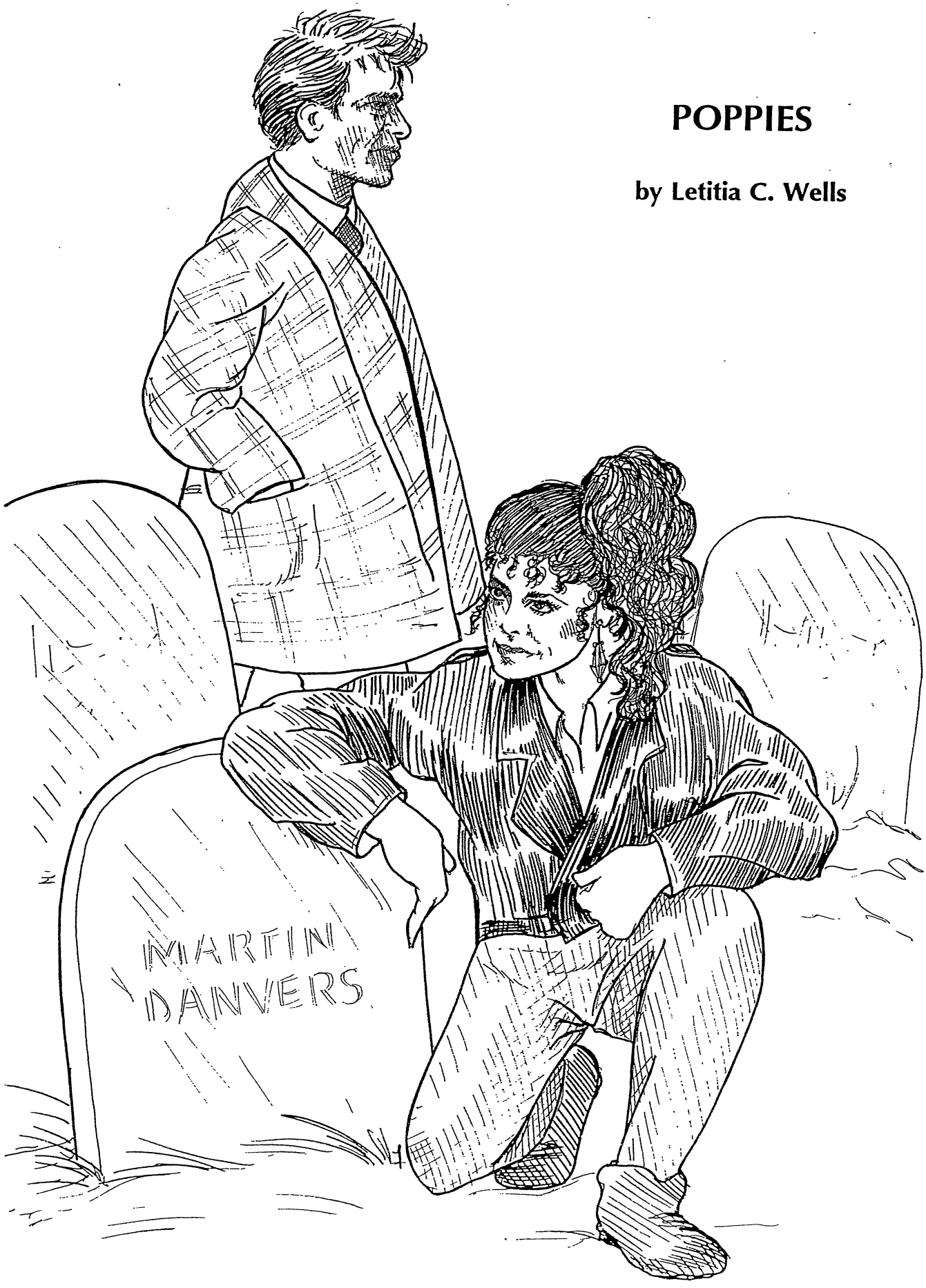
Premise: Veteran newspaper reporter Carl Kolchak found himself face to face with a modern-day vampire while tracking down a story in Las Vegas, Nevada. With this unlikely event, he entered a world of the supernatural contained in the mundane, coming into conflict with an age-old alchemist, succubi, mummies, zombies and all manner of arcane characters.

Episode List: (in approximate order of airdates)

The Night Stalker (movie)
The Night Strangler (movie)
The Ripper
The Zombie
U.F.O.
The Vampire
The Werewolf
The Devil's Platform
Bad Medicine
The Spanish Moss Murders
The Energy Eater
Horror In The Heights
Mr. R.I.N.G.
The Primal Scream
The Trevi Collection
Chopper
Demon In Lace
Legacy Of Terror
The Knightly Murders
The Youth Killer
The Sentry

POPPIES

by Letitia C. Wells



Randi Wallace pulled tighter the leather jacket she wore over her cotton blouse and jeans. The air was cold and wet with a late morning mist still covering the marshy landscape. She knew that this was considered warm for November in England, but Randi was from Southern California and she thought it was miserable. "Ian? What are we doing in Little Farthing? This is not exactly close to London."

Ian Matheson, professor of literature and the occult, and her unofficial boyfriend, smiled sheepishly as he helped her down off the train. "Someone told Mrs. Stern about my book and she was quite insistent that I come down here to meet her."

"You got asked because of *The Face of Fear*?" Randi asked, her tone subtly skeptical. Ian's book had had very little circulation. Randi wondered how anyone in this little town had ever heard of it.

As they walked through the old brick train station, she noticed that the building showed signs of time, decay and mold. Some faded posters sat behind speckled glass frames, and rusty wire mesh covered the tall Victorian stained glass windows. It looked like time had stopped in Nineteen Twenty.

"It's a book of great depth and scholarship," Ian said with dignity. "Mrs. Stern quoted parts of it to me so she knows what kind of scholar I am, Randi."

As they carried their overnight bags, the mist became a slow drizzle. The latter part of the twentieth century had bypassed Little Farthing. Sometime in the last fifty years, the main street had been widened and surfaced with tar, making the sidewalk only a foot wide, but horse posts were still set in front of several buildings.

The old post office was straight out of a Dickens novel except that it had cracked and peeling paint and stood right next to a modern drug store. Posters, dimmed by years of the sun's light, hung in windows. Outside was an old-fashioned telephone box next to a wood pole strung with telephone and power lines. Crammed next to this was a Victorian street lamp that Randi could almost imagine being lit by hand. Other stores lined the narrow, twisted street: a bookstore, dimly lit behind its cluttered windows, a butcher's sitting next to a sweets shop, a linen draper's with a neatly printed faded note saying the owners also tailored military uniforms. The girl looked closely. The curvy calligraphy was very dim and the date of the note was almost gone. Nineteen ... oh ... what?

She wondered if there was a good restaurant somewhere nearby. Her stomach growled at the thought. To distract it, she asked, "But what does she really want from you, Ian?"

"She says she's being haunted. She's asked me to exorcise the ghost," Ian said with dignity.

"You aren't an exorcist!"

"No. But she wouldn't take that for an answer." Ian turned and looked back at the young woman. "Randi, think of it as a day in the country."

"Ian, it's going to rain soon. It's not like it's high summer when the famed English roses are in bloom!" she grumbled, hitching her bag higher on her arm. An old man tipped his hat to her and she smiled back and nodded. From the people around them, Little Farthing was mostly inhabited by the elderly.

"Mrs. Stern did pay for the tickets down here. Randi, we'll have our talk, then have our tea at one of the restaurants with mountains of clotted cream and scones," he bribed her. "And think of your dissertation. The house has been in her family for generations and is probably haunted by many ghosts. Might make an interesting chapter."

"I'd rather be in London," Randi muttered. "Besides we both know my dissertation's going to be on the werewolf curse and how to cure it."

He winced. "It's Saturday and the full moon isn't till Monday night. By then we'll be in London again and I can chain you up in the basement."

Beyond the main cluster of buildings, the sidewalk widened. On the left was a crumbling four foot stone wall, topped irregularly with flat paving stones. Other stones lay in broken shards on the sidewalk.

"Geeze!" Randi jumped back, the knapsack hitting her back.

A gargoyle head peered out of the mist, taking her by surprise. A fraction of a second later, she realized it was just stone. The statue had been perched on the wall, after probably tumbling from its lofty perch on the old stone church. The Church had probably been on the outskirts of Little Farthing once, but as the town grew, it spread beyond the old graveyard. Some of the gravestones leaned drunkenly while a few were tumbled facedown in the wet sod. Near the entrance to the churchyard, a massive thorn tree had spread over the wall to snare Ian's Fair Isles sweater as he strolled by.

She shivered as she looked at the thick leaves. They would have to cut that tree back soon or it would cover the entire graveyard. I'll bet if the sun's out, the tree's shadow would reach the church steps, she thought absently. There was grassy mold on the gravestones shaded by the tree.

With a start she noticed a man standing by a grave on the far side, but half-hidden in the mist. Randi wondered if he was a gardener or a grave digger. Don't they generally bury people on Sundays? She felt vaguely uncomfortable for no understandable reason. Had the man been watching her and Ian? Why? Were strangers so rare in Little Farthing that they were stared at?

She glanced at the church. A small man, dressed in clerical black with a white collar, had come out of the woods behind the stone building carrying a bundle of cut greens. He climbed the uneven stone stairs to the church. He looked very different from the figure by the tree.

"Ian, is there something special going on?" she asked. "Look, he's decorating."

Ian glanced over disinterestedly. "I don't remember really. Haven't been to church in years and you know the last graveyard we went into had that Juggler ghost! It's only been a couple of days since then. You can't want —"

"Oh, Ian, not every graveyard is haunted!" she disagreed.

"That's true," he conceded. "We've got a few minutes, Randi. Want to go inside?"

"Yes. Why not?"

They walked up the stone path leading to the paint-worn, heavily-carved wooden door.

It was dim inside; faint light filtered through the wire netting hung over the inside of the stained-glass windows. The oak pews were nicked and gouged from centuries of use and the seat covers were worn and shabby. In contrast, gleaming bronze modern sconces were mounted on the whitewashed plaster walls. The lighting must at least be new.

Randi walked up to the altar facing the door. The wooden crucifix was plainly carved and the altar had an arrangement of autumn blossoms in a chipped basin decorated with flowers and set on patched white linen. The greens were spread out on the stone paving below the altar with a pile of paper flowers next to them.

Actually, Randi mused, it's rather a nice old church. The interior gave a feeling of wholesomeness despite the wear-and-tear of ages. Herbs had to be part of the floral arrangement since their faint scent still permeated the area. The stained glass windows were dimmed by age and pollution. She looked up at one which

portrayed a soldier, a flag, and choirs of angels blowing trumpets. Names were written on the glass in small cramped cursive. A War Memorial window most likely, she guessed.

"May I help you?" a voice hailed them as the man she'd seen outside came around the altar. "I'm Anthony Potter, the vicar."

The round face and dark brown eyes of the man were reassuringly commonplace as was the white collar encircling his throat.

"It's a lovely church," Ian commented as he came up beside Randi. "It looks almost Norman."

"Parts are," the man said cheerfully coming down the aisle. "It incorporates part of a chapel from the old castle ruins, but the church itself has been constantly rebuilt for centuries. Outside we have a few graves that are at least a thousand years old and one archeologist swore she unearthed a gravestone with Ogham on it."

"Really?" Ian's face lit up. "That's almost unbelievable. I thought most of the ancient burial sites were mapped."

"I believe we also have the oldest black thorn tree in England," the man added proudly. "It's been in Little Farthing's chronicles for as long as records have been kept."

Ian held out his hand. "I'm Ian Matheson, a professor of mythology. This is one of my graduate students, Randi Wallace,"

The vicar shook his hand and smiled at Randi who returned it. From the small darn in his cuff, the man's garb was as worn as his church. This wasn't a well-paying parish.

"A mythology professor?" Potter laughed. "You're here about my Great-Aunt Camilla?"

Ian blinked in surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Camilla Potter-Stern. This is a small town, Professor and when she said she was calling in a professor ..." Potter shook his head. "I'm afraid Graunty has finally gone round the bend."

"Why do you say that?" Randi asked curiously. "We're going to lunch with her."

The man looked at her nonplussed for a second. "Well, a *ghost*, after all ... Now there have been legends about Little Farthing's church for centuries but a ghost around here is a new thing."

"Really? What kind of legends?" Ian pursued in a professorial tone.

"Oh, devil worship, Druids and that kind of rot. Apparently they used to sacrifice children to the local tree deities but that was before the Christians arrived. Now we sacrifice peat instead."

"You seem to have been renovating," Ian commented looking around. "Aren't those new lights around the altar?"

The vicar beamed. "You noticed! Yes, we used the money built up by the Danvers' bequest to put electricity in. You couldn't use this building most evenings because of the cold and damp. I had to use candles or mobile lamps. Ridiculous!"

"Bequest?" Randi asked.

The vicar shrugged. "The Danvers family have been local gentry for generations. Their castle's chapel stood here until the Reformation when it was torn down. When Charles II returned, this church was built

incorporating the walls of the chapel." The man gestured toward a small window in the left side of the church. Randi had noticed it since it was only accessible to a person on a ladder and was off-centered in the wall. In fact, the stones around it were a different size and shape than most of the church. "It's said that the town will prosper and all its people be healthy, if a candle is left burning in that window. Of course, it's just a myth. The family were the ones who started the candle-in-the-window business. We had to snuff it for the First World War and after that ... well, with blackout regulations in the second War, and then someone broke the antique glass, so we haven't lit a candle for years. We restored the glass — cost a fortune, and tomorrow morning we're going to reinstate the candle custom. It will be a memorable moment for Little Farthing."

"I beg your pardon?" Ian asked puzzled.

"We've installed one of those electric candle lights in the window and I'll turn it on as one of the elements in the ceremony."

Ian looked around, understanding finally dawning on his face. "Ah. The ceremony. Of course."

"Ian ..." Randi quizzed. "What ceremony?"

The vicar took pity on her. "It's Armistice Day, Miss Wallace. What you Americans call Veterans Day, I believe. That's why all the cut greens."

"And the poppies," Ian said glancing at the red paper flowers. "You decorate the altar for Armistice Day."

"Yes." Potter's face grew stern for a second. "We lost so many men of the village at the Somme and Dunkirk. Their names are on that window." He waved towards the window Randi had been studying.

Randi nodded, glad her assumption had been right. It was a memorial window.

"Well, we'll leave you to your work," Ian announced heartily. "Thank you for the information, Vicar."

"It's the seventy-first anniversary of the end of World War I, and the seventieth anniversary of our village's Armistice Day celebration, remember, so it's a special occasion. We'll be rehearsing the ceremony's music tonight. Come in tomorrow," the young man urged them as he ushered them towards the door. "I'll make sure you get good seats. We're seldom full up anymore."

"Sure," Randi replied, hefting her knapsack. "That sounds like fun."

As they stepped onto the sidewalk, Randi looked back at the graveyard. The man was not standing by the gravestone but was now leaning against the bark of the tree, the dark wood blending eerily with his clothing. He raised his hand slightly as if in greeting and Randi flinched though she couldn't say why. She blinked. The man was gone and there was nothing but mist beneath the tree.

* * *

The town was gay with bunting and flags waved in the slight breeze. The local paper screamed that England had declared war on Germany on August Fourth Nineteen Fourteen, and a list of local blackout regulations.

"Go away! Go to the sweets shop, Camilla!"

"Don't want to," the girl said stubbornly, her red mouth tightening. She clung to the skirt of the young woman.

"Oh, don't be a silly," the young woman complained, pushing her off with a slight shove. "I didn't want you along anyway 'cause I'm meeting Martin! Now go away, you little pest!"

Camilla knew that if Mother knew what Paula was doing, she'd be locked in her room until her wedding. Of course, her fiancee, Martin Danvers was headed for the War trenches in a week and the wedding had been postponed, but Paula used his imminent departure as an excuse to go out each night to say farewell, completely ignoring the important fact that Camilla wanted to say goodbye to Martin as well.

She saw one of her mother's friends was waving at her from across the street. Looking carefully both ways, she crossed, a trim ten-year old in her neatly smocked pinafore frock and small straw hat and shiny patent leather shoes. Her thick ash-blond hair hung down her back.

Before the child reached her, the woman disappeared into the crowd of men standing in front of the Post Office. Camilla stopped, disappointed, beside the recently repaired stone wall that bordered the graveyard.

Most of the men wore lounge suits except for two soldiers bantering with their cronies. She watched avidly as one soldier broke from the crowd, making for Paula, who was smiling and waving. He slid his arm around her sister's waist, and with one intimate gesture, placed a kiss on her lips.

Camilla was filled with a wave of sheer hatred for her sister. It was a passion she'd never felt before, jealousy laced with envy and the bitterness that Martin Danvers wasn't going to wait for her to grow up after all.

"Do you want him, little girl?" a soft male voice said behind her.

She looked over, her eyes wide and alarmed. The man leaning over the stone graveyard wall had sallow skin tightly drawn over his sharp cheekbones, and deep-set eyes beneath hairless brows. The brushed back dark brown hair reached the collar of his worn black suit. He looks one of those church stone statues that spit water after a rain, Camilla thought unexpectedly. The longer she looked at him, the more normal he looked.

"Who is that?" the man asked, his gaze going back to Martin.

"Martin Danvers. He's going off to France tomorrow. To the trenches," she replied miserably.

"And you'll never have him," the man said mockingly. His voice dropped to a seductive whisper. "What would you give me, little girl, if I can get him for you?"

She stared at him for a terrified instant, then Camilla bolted for her sister, almost under the feet of a dray horse pulling a cart. The carter cursed and hauled on the reins as she fled. She was crying by the time she reached Paula's side.

"There you are," her sister scolded, reaching down to take Camilla's hand. "Martin and I are going to high tea at the Arms, so you go home with Mrs. Clawdy. Here she comes now."

"You told Mother you would take care of me," Camilla reminded her sullenly.

"Oh, let her come," Martin said kindly. "I'll buy you some ice, Camilla."

Paula smacked her on the shoulder reprovingly. "Don't argue with me, Camilla. I'll see you back at the Manor and, if you tell Mother, I'll whip you!"

Camilla wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'll go home by myself and I won't tell Mother but I wish you were *dead*!" With a stamp of her food, she fled into the crowd.

* * *

Ian led the way up the stone walkway to a rundown Tudor-style house. Two stories high, it had mullioned windows and a crumbling thatch roof. Masses of bushes and tall trees encircled the house. Birds darted out of the decaying trellis propped against the front wall and a flock of crows cawed from the hedges.

Following Ian's knock, the wooden door was opened by an old woman. Randi corrected herself quickly. Not only an old but very old woman who stood with the help of a rubber-tipped silver cane. She held herself imperiously straight though the silver hair was pulled back untidily in a bun, and the dress hid a heavy body.

"Mrs. Stern?" Ian asked hesitantly.

"Professor Matheson?" she replied in a raspy tone that Randi instantly set down to too many cigarettes for too many years. "Please come in."

"This is my assistant, Randi Wallace," Ian introduced smoothly as he followed the old lady into the house.

Randi shut the door behind her. The narrow hallway was dark and claustrophobic, with a slightly sour smell that Randi identified as over-aged meat with a covering odor of stale cigarette smoke. She followed Ian and Mrs. Stern into a parlor, pausing to survey the room.

Probably eighty years ago it had been fashionably elegant. Now the threadbare sofa sagged and worn spots showed through the carpeting. The room was cluttered with small tables on which were small porcelain dishes, magazines, embroidery floss and needles stuck into half-completed pictures and a number of ancient photographs in pewter frames. Above the smoke-stained fireplace, where a log burned sullenly, was a painting of a woman in the high-fashion style of nearly a century ago and two girls, one in a pinafore and the other in a coming-out gown. Beside the painting was an old hunting gun and a smaller modern revolver, both gleaming with recent care and mounted carefully on prongs.

The old woman waved for them to sit on the couch as she sat in a large chair beside the fireplace.

Through the age-sagged flesh, Randi could see the remnant of an amazing beauty. Her gaze went to the pictures on the wall. The younger girl or the older girl?

"Mrs. Stern," Ian prompted gently as the woman stared at them. "You asked me to come down here about the ghost?"

Mrs. Stern smiled unexpectedly. Her teeth were yellowed with age and tobacco stains. "First we must have sandwiches and tea, Professor. The maid will be here in a second."

"Is that you, ma'am?" Randi asked glancing upward.

Mrs. Stern nodded after a reserved second. "With my mother and my sister, Paula. Our family has lived in this house for nearly five generations. That's over two hundred years, young lady." She fumbled for the small box at her side and picked out a cigarette.

Ian shook his head fractionally at Randi, who was about to protest. "May I help you?" he asked delicately, picking up a tubular silver lighter from the table between them, and flicking the switch. A small flame came up.

"You don't approve?" Mrs. Stern barked at Randi as she leaned forward. "Well, it's too late to change me, little girl. Ah, here is tea."

The maid entered and placed the heavy silver tea set on the table between the old woman and her guests, then left.

Randi, squelched by Ian's silent disapproval, took one thin sliced cucumber sandwich and the cup of tea which Mrs. Stern had shakily poured. She sank back into the overstuffed couch.

"Delicious," Ian said, sipping the tea. "Now, Mrs. Stern ..."

"There is another family picture beside you," the old woman cut him off imperiously.

Randi looked around to see the ornate metal frame beside her. It held a faded picture of a young man in an old-fashioned uniform, complete with a pistol that looked very much like the one on the wall, and a young woman from the painting, leaning on his arm and smiling smugly. The man was almost as tall as Ian from the picture. "Who's the guy?" she asked, picking up the picture and passing it to Ian.

The old woman stiffened at the flippant question and Ian winced.

"Please forgive her," he offered soothingly. "She's an American."

Randi vowed silently to make him regret that comment.

"That 'guy', as you put it," Mrs. Stern announced abruptly, "is the man who is haunting me. And I want you, Professor, to put a stop to it!"

"Who is he?" Ian asked.

"His name was Martin. He was my sister's lover and he went mad in this very room in Nineteen-Nineteen."

* * *

The War was finally over. The world was at peace and the economy was gearing down from its wartime high. The soldiers had come home, leaving too many to count behind in the muddy trenches and graveyards of France, and Paula was finally getting married to Martin.

He had come back six months ago, a shell of the man who had happily gone off to war in Nineteen-Fourteen. Out of his earshot, Paula complained bitterly he had shown little interest in her and that it was like kissing a ghost. Her shrill voice had pierced right through the Manor's thin plaster walls and Camilla knew all the problems by heart.

She walked past the post office remembering how the soldiers had looked as they had assembled there. Only five of the forty men who had left that first year had come back to Little Farthing. Several of her sister's friends wore black.

The girl drifted past the churchyard, her fourteen-year-old mind tangled with mixed emotions. The night was warm and humid, mist from an earlier rain shower rising around her. One of the new motorcars sped past her, its wheels clattering on the cobblestone streets.

She turned and looked at the stone church. A dark presence in the night, she had heard that it might close for good. Too many of the parishioners had died at the Somme and Verdun, and the Church of England was thinking of cutting back.

But in a week, Martin would marry Paula in front of its altar, and life wouldn't be worth living anymore.

"Don't marry her," she whispered softly. "I waited for you to come home, Martin."

In her heart she knew it was impossible that Martin would throw over her sister. Their son, Grenville, conceived on a leave three and half years ago, would prevent the honorable Martin from abandoning Paula. Mother had almost died of mortification when Paula had announced her pregnancy but after Grenville arrived, she'd become reconciled to her daughter and her grandson. Now, she doted on the youngster. Camilla remembered her childhood and knew the bitter sting of injustice. She had never been so indulged.

Camilla found herself beside the graveyard entrance where the long looming branches of the thorn tree reached out. She paused, then stepped off the stone walkway into the street.

A motorcar came abruptly out of a bank of fog, its headlights piercing the gray. She gasped and leapt back, feeling the loose flagstones that topped the stone wall grind into her back. Her heart pounded like the guns on Armistice Day.

The automobile disappeared into the night as ghostly as it appeared.

Something touched her neck gently, moving up into her hair, tangling the strands.

She screamed and jumped away.

Then she laughed. One of the long twigs of the thorn tree had snared her blond hair.

Reaching up, she unwove the strand, pushing it back behind her ears.

"'Tis a night for lovers," a voice said softly out of the darkness beneath the tree.

She stepped backward, knowing that the wall at least would shield her for a second from the intruder. "What? Who — are you?"

The man stepped closer, put his hands palm-down on the stone wall, and leaned forward. The street lamp outlined the planes of his long face. "I'm a friend. Such a lady as you shouldn't be alone on a night like this."

Camilla flushed. "I want to be ... alone."

"Do you really want him that much?" the man asked softly. "This man you're grieving for."

She flinched, eyeing him warily. "What did you hear?"

He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a flower. "Take this home with you," he offered, holding it out.

She held up her hand warding him off. "I can't accept something from a stranger."

"Not even a special flower?" he wheedled. "Look at it. Just one blossom. It'll give you want you really want, Camilla."

His gaze seemed to go through her. What did she really want? Martin! Would the flower give her Martin? Anything would be worth that. But how could it ... She hesitantly took the flower without looking away from his dark eyes. "What is it?"

"A poppy. Just a pretty posy for a pretty woman. And you are a woman, Camilla, as much as your sister," the man said quietly. "You would be wasted on Martin."

"I won't ever have him," she snapped waspishly, tears flowing from her eyes. "I would give my ..."

"Soul?" he asked softly. "Do you love him that much?"

"It's too late," she said.

"Yes, far too late," he agreed. "Come back when you need me again, Camilla. We'll talk then."

Numb, she barely heard his words. She repeated bitterly, "It's too late for me," as she walked away into the fog.

Ten minutes later she let herself into the hallway of the Manor.

"Camilla!" her mother's stern voice came from the parlor. "Where have you been, girl? Tidy yourself immediately and come in here."

She felt a surge of rebellion and almost hatred. Couldn't she even take a walk without being watched?

Looking down, Camilla saw the single poppy blossom still in her hand. "Coming, Mother."

Martin was there, staring out the window over the back lawn, flicking his silver lighter on and off. Her mother was by the gramophone selecting music.

"What's that?" Paula asked lazily from the sofa where Grenville was tearing pages out of a book and scattering them around. "Now, you're getting flowers, Camilla?"

The girl tossed back her head defiantly. "This one's for Martin."

The young man turned around with a slight smile and saw the flower. He screamed.

* * *

"I gave him a poppy from the churchyard which sent him insane. He never married Paula," the old woman concluded.

"Why?" Randi asked bluntly. "It's only a flower."

Mrs. Stern stared at her in utter disdain. "The fields of Flanders were strewn with poppies, and Martin was the only survivor of his company. He remembered the blood mixing with the flowers and he dwelled on it endlessly in the sanatorium before he died. Did no one teach you any history, young lady?" she demanded scornfully.

Randi felt a twinge of dislike. "Our schools gave up English history in Seventeen Seventy-six, ma'am."

"Several months later, I went to London," Mrs. Stern continued ignoring Randi's comment.

"What did you do there?" Randi asked wondering if she could sneak another cucumber sandwich.

Mrs. Stern's withered lips curled back in a bitter smile as she reviewed her memories. "Escaping Little Farthing. I met my husband, Phillip Stern, in London."

* * *

Camilla felt heavy and lumpish. Looking in the plate window's reflection she could see her body reflected like a giant whale with all the extra weight gained in Janet's birth.

She hated Phillip Stern with all her soul. This was the third pregnancy in four years and it hadn't been her fault that the children had only survived a month in each case. She and Phillip had quarreled over whether she should try again, Phillip insisting that it had to be done, Camilla pointing out she had nearly died each time.

And now, she was back in the last place she wanted to be as well. Little Farthing had changed little in the five years since she'd fled the afternoon of Martin's funeral. From the train she'd watched the mourners standing beside his open grave, the thorn tree casting a shadow over their dark blacks and gray clothing. She remembered holding up his silver lighter and waving farewell as the coach rumbled past. It had dropped from his hand and rolled under the couch the night he'd gone insane. She retrieved it the next day and kept the lighter for herself. A keepsake of what might have been if only her sister hadn't been around.

Camilla stopped on the steps of the church and took a deep breath, then went inside. Her mother would be waiting in the expensive coffin that she had chosen with Camilla's part of the inheritance. Camilla wouldn't inherit a penny and she hated her mother for that. She needed the money to escape Phillip.

It was dark despite the sunshine coming through the stained glass windows. She ignored the rustling and murmuring as she walked up to the front pew.

Paula and Grenville were already seated. Her older sister glared at Camilla and grudgingly moved down the hard wooden seat to let her in.

Grenville looked at her with the wide eyes of a seven-year-old. His dark hair was slicked back, his brown eyes had lashes like a girl's and Camilla felt sick for a second. He looked so much like Martin!

The service was mercifully brief as the church was freezing in the chill October air, and the vicar led the parade of mourners to the grave site.

Camilla tried to speak with a couple of her old friends but could feel a chill in their attitudes when she approached. Do they still blame me for Martin? It wasn't my fault! Bitterness ate into her. Probably Mother or Paula has told them all about my flight and they think I went to London to become a whore.

"And that's what Phillip has done to me," she realized abruptly. All he wants is a child. What about me?

"What is it you really want?" she heard a vaguely familiar voice in her ear.

She turned and looked.

The same man from the mist stood beside her. He still wore a dark suit, and his hair slicked back from his long face. Camilla felt for a second as if she was alone in the graveyard, though from the corner of her eye, she could see the other mourners. Didn't they see him?

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" she demanded defiantly.

"You. I want you," he said simply.

"Oh, just another man who wants me," she replied aloud her tone loaded with bitterness. Someone beside her shot her a horrified glance and moved a few steps apart.

"I have watched you for years. We're so much alike. We both want things to go our way, and we can see exactly what we want. No illusions, Camilla. For a price, I can give you exactly what you really want," the man said with a ghost of laughter.

Camilla licked her lips. "What I want is Phillip dead," she said in a whisper. "I will do anything to free myself."

"Tonight." The whisper was a caress on her cheek. "Come back tonight under the tree and we'll discuss payment. Poppies aren't free. But your friar's about to speak."

Camilla turned as the vicar cleared his throat. She looked back a second later. The stranger was gone.

* * *

"Phillip died shortly after my mother, leaving me his only inheritor. Not a big fortune, but I didn't come back to Little Farthing again till after the second World War. One of those Jerry bombs hit my sister when she was in London, leaving Grenville to inherit this house. Then he was called into the Royal Marines and someone had to take care of the house. When he was killed at Dunkirk, his wife didn't want to stay here, and went

back to her village. Of course Grenville's son is the Vicar, so I suppose the house belongs to him," Mrs. Stern concluded, stubbing out her cigarette. "I'm getting older, Professor, and I have to look after myself. I want to make my peace with the other side before I leave," she said with a determined thump of her cane.

"And now you say Martin is haunting you? When did you first see him?" Ian asked, folding his hands.

"And what makes you think he is haunting you, Mrs. Stern?" Randi said gently.

Mrs. Stern gave her a frigid stare and turned back to Ian. "I saw him down in the churchyard. His grave's by that old tree."

Ian cut in hastily. "What exactly do you think I can do, Mrs. Stern? Wouldn't the Vicar be a better choice?"

She brushed aside the suggestion with a sniff. "He's just a boy. He doesn't know anything. He did give me your book, Professor, which is why I selected you for this. I was very impressed with the scholarship shown in *The Face Of Fear.* It was almost as if it had been written in the last century. Very complete."

And dull as parchment at certain points, Randi remembered. Still, if Mrs. Stern had read it, she was ahead of most of the literary community. Why had she chosen Ian, though? The book had no instructions for ghostly exorcisms!

Ian set his cup and saucer down on the fragile wooden table beside him. "Thank you, Ma'am. But I am not a trained exorcist. My training is in old myths and legends. Ghosts are a category all to themselves, Mrs. Stern."

"He's a demon," she said abruptly. "Your book had a chapter on demons. You go look for yourself at that graveyard and find a way to stop him."

Randi stared at her totally at a loss. Martin was a demon? "I thought you said he was a ghost!" she expostulated.

The old woman suddenly looked tired and lost, her skin fading to a parchment white. "I'm very tired of it. He's always near me, always waiting for me and I want to be free. That's why I thought you would do for me, Professor. Help me."

"I'll do my best," Ian replied gently as he stood. "I suppose the graveyard is our next stop. Thank you for tea, Mrs. Stern, we must be going."

"We haven't discussed your fee," she stated flatly reviving for an instant.

"That's all right," he answered soothingly. "We can discuss it later once I prove that I can indeed help you."

"Very well, young man," she agreed with a smile that showed yellowed crooked teeth. Randi almost flinched. "I have been told you are a very clever, clever man. I will see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ian replied obediently, and led the way out, Randi following on his heels.

Outside, beyond the garden gate, the girl took a deep breath of clean air and let it out with a whoosh. "Ian, what an unhappy, bitter woman!"

"She's had a hard life, Randi," Ian answered abstracted. "What do you think of her story?"

"Why should Martin haunt her?" Randi asked bluntly. "She didn't give him that flower on purpose."

"And why should he come back now? It really doesn't make sense." Ian shrugged. "Let's check out the graveyard again."

* * *

The temperature was dropping further as the skies darkened. Randi shivered and closed her jacket, zipping it up.

The graves were not as badly tended as she had thought. In front of several were plastic flowers while others had small Union Jacks. Randi carefully wove her way over the uneven ground toward the far edge where the thorn tree loomed over several graves. The ground beneath it was dark and shadowy, uncovered roots showing like tentacles.

"Martin ... Danvers," she said standing just to the right of the grave. The incised lettering was barely perceptible in the twilight. "Here he is, Ian."

"Where would you expect him to be? Drinking half-and-half in the local?" her friend commented petulantly as he came up to the grave. He glanced up at the towering thorn tree. It loomed against the cloudy grey skies and the wind blew through it with a wail. "Well, it's a healthy specimen," he commented. "I guess living on all that blood centuries ago and the Vicar's mulch."

"Don't even joke about it," Randi warned, eyeing the tree. Her senses were far more attuned to the supernatural since she'd been cursed and there was something about the tree that made her sick.

She closed her eyes and caught one of the branches. Suddenly, she felt ice pour down her spine and her nose smelled blood and hunger, bitter vengeance and mockery, the distillation of an ancient evil. Something within the trunk stirred and laughed, and Randi whimpered. It reached out a tendril, the smell of dead meat clogging her sensitive nostrils, and she felt something move passed her.

"Randi!" Ian's voice was harsh in her ears. She felt his hands grip her shoulders and shake her. She opened her eyes.

She was facing the church, cracked twigs in her clenched hands. The last traces of afternoon light glittered on the wire meshing and the glass of the windows.
Suddenly the wind laughed mockingly, and she heard rustling as the branches scraped each other. At the edge of her senses, she could feel that presence, cold, hungry and waiting for someone specific. But it wasn't her. It wanted someone else.

"Ian ... Let's get the hell outta here!" she screamed, running past him.

He scooped up both knapsacks and raced after her over the sodden ground toward the town's bright lights.

In the harsh light of the local pub, Randi put down her empty mug of bitter and took a deep breath. "What happened?" she asked licking the beer off her upper lip.

"You don't remember?" Ian asked. "You went as white as a sheet and stumbled back, then you were staring at that small church window as though God himself was going to appear and save you. That's when I grabbed you."

She shivered again and took a bite of the Cornish pastie on her plate. "It's still there, whatever it is. Waiting."

"Is it Martin?" he asked, taking a bite of his own savoury.

Randi stared at him. "Martin? No, not Martin!," she disagreed. "Not human, it was never human."

"One of those local deities the Vicar mentioned, then?" Ian joked uneasily.

"Nothing so benign, though I'm not sure anything they used to sacrifice children to, could be called benign! Mrs. Stern called it a demon and she's right!" She stared at him, her eyes filled with sudden horror. "Ian, it went right past me! It's after Mrs. Stern. What are you going to do for her?"

"I can't do anything for her," Ian admitted reluctantly. "I'm not a trained exorcist and I didn't feel a thing in front of that tree. Perhaps we can recommend someone in that line of work though most Catholic priests I know won't countenance it ..."

For a few moments they were silent, each eating their meal.

"Ian, I'm still wondering why Mrs. Stern asked you here," Randi finally said slowly chewing around a mouthful of beef and potato.

The man gave her a startled look. "What do you mean, Randi? You think she's not telling us something?"

"Again, why you? You're not a trained exorcist." Randi began to tick off facts on her fingers. "Let's look at the whole picture. She was in love with her sister's lover —"

"Puppy love," he nodded. "Woman always remember their first great love ... or so I'm told," he finished hastily as she gave him a dirty look.

"So she ran away from her home and saw it and her inheritance go to Paula's illegitimate offspring, she had an abusive husband, three dead children and now she's living in a house she grew up in and doesn't even own it! Ian, I've never met a person so full of personal bitterness and anger at life. She hates everything around her." The realization was blinding. "Ian, she's like that thing in the tree!"

"Oh, come now, Randi, Mrs. Stern's no demon and she doesn't have long to live. She must be almost ninety now. Maybe she *is* trying to make peace with her conscience."

"This manifestation of Martin is probably all in her mind," Randi concluded. "But whatever's out there in that tree might be taking Martin's image to haunt Mrs. Stern."

"Are you sure," Ian said delicately, moving back slightly, "that there *was* something out in that tree? It wasn't just pangs of hunger or anticipation of supper —" he broke off when she made a face at him.

"Hardly. And I still want to know why she chose *you*, Ian, to help her get rid of the ghost. Whether it's an illusion or not!"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow we can talk to her maid and find out how long this has been going on. We should talk to the Vicar as well after the ceremony."

"Where're we staying tonight, Ian?" Randi cocked her head hopefully.

He smiled engagingly amused by her transparent hopefulness. He wasn't quite to the point where he'd cross the line and sleep with a student ... but he knew it was just outside the door. "I found a bed-and-breakfast in town. Let's go and check in."

* * *

The night was crystal clear and icy. A slight breeze sneaked through shutters, rustling curtains, and chilling the bedclothes of the single bed. Outside it scattered dead leaves along the cracked streets and shook the barren trees. Somewhere in the bed-and-breakfast a phone rang twice.

Randi looked up at the nearly-full moon. At least the werewolf curse wasn't like my monthly, she consoled herself. She didn't get cramps or feel nauseous but the night she changed it was agony tripled. Well, we'll be back in London by then.

The street lamps took the village back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the church was a dark shape looming on the horizon against the crystal stars. Her imagination supplied the long fingers of the thorn tree and she stepped back from the glass with a feeling of revulsion. She remembered the mist-clad gardener and wondered if he had been the demon or just a man.

Her trained memory supplied other mentions of haunted foliage. There was a hazel tree that was reputed to have a demon down in South Wales, a weeping willow in Devon that was known to be the place where drowned bodies washed up.

Where was Ian? He had gone downstairs to get more towels and another blanket after Randi had complained about the cold but that had been ten minutes ago.

She turned back to her bed, and pulled a notebook out of her knapsack. At least she could write up the case while she was waiting.

Her mind went over the stories again and again. Something was missing. Mrs. Stern hadn't been very forthcoming about a number of things. Was it really Martin Danvers out there beneath the tree trying to exact revenge against the woman who drove him insane?

Randi didn't believe it. Whatever was out there was evil incarnate. So what connection did that thing really have with Mrs. Stern?

An idea struck her. Had that evil thing given Mrs. Stern's the flower? Had she given it to Martin in revenge? They had to know more about Mrs. Stern and the stranger before they could help the woman. Even if the old woman was insane, that thing in the tree needed to be contained. Not that Ian or I know the first thing about containing demons ...

Eager to discuss her insights with Ian, Randi hopped off the bed and headed for the door. Opening it, she could hear the sound of the television in the main room downstairs. She picked up her jacket, pulled it on, and then went down the narrow steps.

The placid landlord looked up from the living room. "Going out dear?"

"Where's Ian?" Randi panted.

"Your young man? He took a phone call and went out about five minutes ago."

Randi frowned. "Do you know who the call was from?"

"Oh, yes, dearie. That crazy Mrs. Stern from the Manor. She said she'd met him by the church."

* * *

As he approached the church, Ian wondered what Mrs. Stern had in mind. The old woman had commanded him to leave Randi behind and meet her by the church door, and he had been intrigued enough to follow her instructions. Besides Mrs. Stern and Randi had gotten along like oil and water, and he wasn't in the mood to be a referee at another fight.

The air was chilly crisp and he pulled up his collar as he came up the walkway. From inside he could hear organ music wheezing through some hymn, stopping randomly when the player hit a wrong key. Probably the vicar practicing for tomorrow's ceremony.

It was almost ten in the evening by his watch.

"Professor."

Mrs. Stern's imperious tones were magnified in the cold air.

Ian peered toward the tree. The old woman was standing by the trunk, one hand on the bark, the other hidden at her side. Her cane was propped against the tree. The dark leaves surrounded her like a demonic halo.

"Mrs. Stern?" He approached hesitantly, belatedly realizing that he should have brought Randi. Or maybe gotten some kind of blessing from the vicar. Or holy water? The hairs on his neck rose. There was something in the graveyard besides him and the old woman.

She gazed at him bleakly, her face a hardened mask in the moonlight. "I didn't quite tell you everything, Professor."

"I know," he replied, slowing down until he stood across from her. Between them lay Martin's grave.

"You see, I saw my friend twice, Professor. One was for Martin, the second for Phillip," she explained in a calm reasonable tone. "He told me that all I had to do was give him what he wanted the third time."

"Him?" Ian repeated. "Which 'him' would that be, Mrs. Stern? Phillip? Martin?"

A trace of impatience showed on her face. "No, not Martin. Certainly not Phillip! The man by the wall. He's been here all along. My friend was here long before Little Farthing even existed."

"And what did you give him, Mrs. Stern?" Ian asked his tone suddenly flintlike. "What did you trade for these deaths?"

"What do you think? I was young and greedy. I traded him my soul, Professor. Such a small thing at the time. But I'm a coward and I don't want to go to hell."

For a moment, Ian's academic training made him want to laugh, but then his experiences with Randi made him pause.

"You sold your soul to a demon, Mrs. Stern? I don't think I can save you from him," Ian said quietly, feeling sorry for the old woman.

"You're a very clever man, Professor, and when I told him that you were coming here, he wanted you. He said it was time you met the reality what you were so ludicrously writing about. He wants you. It's my last chance of saving myself, Professor. I'm dying of lung cancer and when I do, he'll take me." She held up her hand. Moonlight glinted off the ancient service revolver in her grip. "So you see, you really can 'save' me."

With dawning horror, Ian took a step back and tripped over a tombstone.

As he struggled to get up, he smelled it. The putrid smell of rotted meat, reminiscent of Mrs. Stern's foyer, floated from the tree. Slowly the darkness began to gather into itself, until the shape of the tree trunk was obscured by the tall form.

The face had been carved on gargoyles that decorated the churchyards of England and the yellow-green eyes spread to twice a human's size as it moved toward the fallen man.

Ian felt a surge of pure horror. He scrambled to his feet and ran, feeling the searing breath of the man behind him.

Ten feet from the church door, he tripped again and sprawled at the feet of a stone Victorian angel. Ian turned and looked back, smelling the hot putrid scent of the demon growing closer.

Someone screamed. He felt a hand yank him to one side. Looking up he saw Randi crouched over him, her face contorted in a snarl.

"It's not a full moon," he commented dazed. "Not till Monday."

"Get away from him!" Randi growled at the hovering demon who had paused halfway across the graveyard.

Mrs. Stern moved until she was standing beside the demon. She leaned heavily on her cane, but in the light of its eyes, Ian thought, she looked like a woman in her early twenties, the age when she had handed her soul to the demon. "Take them both!" she ordered, waving the revolver.

The eyes looked at her, then back at Randi and Ian. "She is already cursed by my people," it said mildly. The tenor voice was unnervingly calm. "I cannot take her."

Ian heard Randi give a sharp gasp. "Cursed by a demon?" she whispered. "I thought just a werewolf was bad enough."

"Don't get distracted," Ian urged. "We'll deal with that later! Get back!" He shoved her arm, but she didn't move from where she was kneeling.

"You're not going to take either of us," Randi hissed. "Take Mrs. Stern! She made the bargain!"

"You've always preferred younger blood," the old woman said with an unpleasant laugh. "Now I'm the one giving you what you wanted, my friend."

"Go back to the hell you came from," Ian commanded shakily, sitting up against the angel.

The demon laughed. "I have been long before your God came to this land and before your Christian hell was even an idea. My power here is in these people who always give me the blood I need."

"You've always preferred younger blood," the old woman repeated, cajoling the demon. "Take him and drink your fill even if you can't take the woman. I'll deal with her." The gun pointed directly at Ian as her arthritic finger pulled the trigger as the demon moved closer, spreading his black smoky tendrils.

The gun's hammer clicked down but the gun never fired. Mrs. Stern stared at it in disbelief and shook it angrily.

"That's Martin's gun, isn't it?" Ian asked, struggling to his feet. "This is his revenge. You sent him to hell on earth and he's not going to let you sent anyone else to hell!"

The old woman glared at him in fury. "I won't be stopped now! I've worked too hard on this!" She pointed the gun again and tried to fire. Nothing happened.

The demon's stench was overpowering as it moved closer and closer, the thin tendrils of black reaching for Ian. They wrapped around him like black ribbons, avoiding Randi as she tried to between Ian and the demon. The mist spread to a fine web closing in around him.

"No!" Randi's scream reverberated through the crystal clear air.

The demon's tenor laugh sounded like the scrape of a knife on a meat bone as it thickened around Ian.

"Martin!" Mrs. Stern suddenly cried, stumbling backwards, holding her hands up, the gun still in one. "Don't —"

The music from inside the church stopped abruptly, and with a dazzling burst of light, the electricity went on inside the church.

Just as suddenly, the mist around Ian dissipated, leaving him gasping and shivering. "The light!" Ian cried weakly, looking up at the church. "Randi, the window!"

The small hexagonal glowed with the small candle bulb. The light fell directly on the dark leaves of the thorn tree.

The gun went off, and the woman's body folded into a heap.

The demon wailed louder than Randi's scream. It writhed, the dark mist resolving into a cloud that enveloped Mrs. Stern. A gun went off. She screamed thinly.

The vicar came out the front door running toward them. Seeing the foggy black cloud and the now-dully glowing eyes, he skidded to a stop. "What the devil —?"

The cloud swirled and thinned, the eyes fading last.

The three survivors looked from one to the other, then back at the tree. The vicar hesitantly walked over to the dead woman, as Ian got shakily to his feet. "Professor?" The vicar said in a hesitant tone.

"Better leave the lights on, vicar," Ian warned, standing up and brushing himself off. "That thing in the tree didn't like it."

The churchman frowned. "That's only a myth told to —"

"That myth has killed at least two people in the last seventy-five years," Randi stated. "And it would have killed us."

"And I would not like to meet it again tonight!" Ian stated flatly. "I'm afraid your great-aunt is dead, Vicar."

As the vicar turned the body upright, Ian grimaced and looked away. Mrs. Stern had died in terror. Even knowing what she had done and what she had planned, this seemed a harsh punishment for her sins.

The vicar crossed himself, then looked up inquiringly. "Two people? Come inside and tell me about it. I must call the police and tell them Graunty's here."

"And, for heaven's sake, vicar, keep the lights on!" Ian urged as they followed the man up the stone walk.

* * *

It dawned cold and clear. Icy dew crusted the windows of the Norman church as the people gathered for Armistice Day services. Most of the people wore small red poppies in their collars or the brim of their dark hats.

Ian, wearing a dark coat with a red paper poppy in the top button sat in the back of the church. Randi sat beside him, her tangle of curls restrained under her black beret and her clothes subdued.

Around them the elderly crowd was being helped into the pews. The altar was decorated with the greens and red poppies that had been lying on the floor the day before.

The vicar came in and went to the pulpit. The night's stress had added lines to the round face. Ian thought he probably looked much like his grandfather, Martin, had after the War.

"This is a day of dedication," the vicar began thoughtfully, "to the brave souls who gave their lives so that we might be free. This day celebrates courage and loyalty and trust. Our valiant men and women stood as a bulwark against the powers that would have destroyed us, as they would today. The need for their efforts and sacrifice has not lessened."

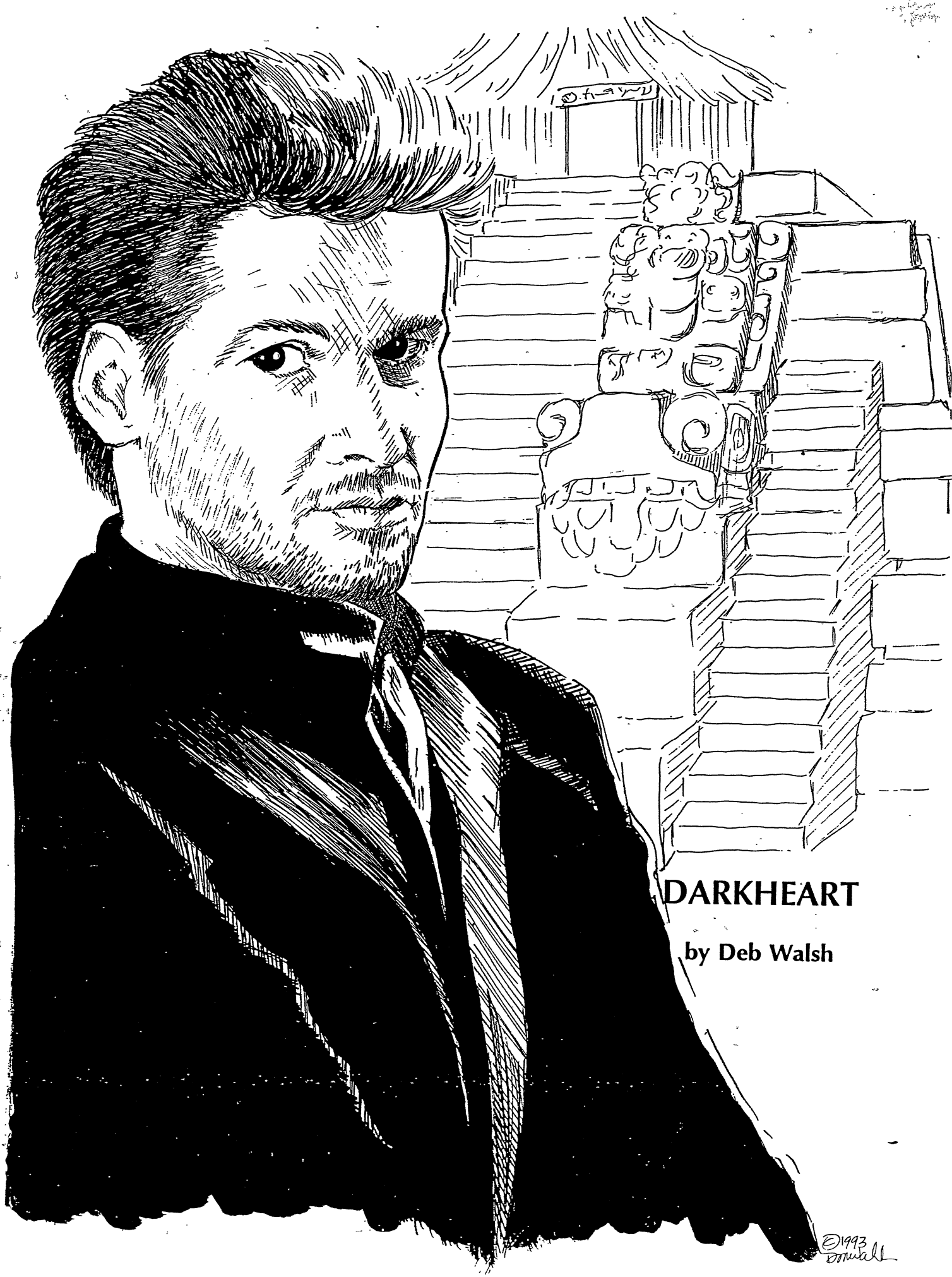
Randi's gaze shifted to the hexagonal window. Her gaze picked out the letters in gothic script. Danvers. Probably the man who had left the bequest had met the entity, though the family must have known about the thing before the Reformation. The Danvers chapel had had the window set in the exact position to seal the demon in the tree; the family must have known about the demon for centuries. Had the same thing happened in the sixteenth century when the Puritans had torn down the castle? Had the demon basically stopped the town in time like it did in Nineteen Fourteen, feeding off the people until a Danvers came back and lit a candle?

And had Martin come back yesterday to save Ian? There was no reasonable cause for the gun to have jammed when pointed at Ian, and fired when turned on Mrs. Stern. The woman's body lay in the town's funeral home waiting for burial; the vicar planned to bury her next to the church, well away from the thorn tree.

What about Ian? They had spent the night in each other's arms but that was because Ian was in shock after being terrified, and all Randi's words weren't as much use as just holding him. He'd fallen asleep when the first streaks of dawn appeared behind the church. Randi hadn't slept at all but barely felt the lack. The demon's words kept haunting her. The werewolf curse. Did the demon mean she'd never be the way she was before she came to England? Somehow that didn't seem fair. There had to be a cure, a ray of hope to keep her from totally giving up and killing herself before she killed more people. The demon was very convincing when he talked. Maybe that was part of his powers. Maybe if Mrs. Stern hadn't believed in him, she wouldn't have gone into his arms. Randi silently resolved, her gaze on the cross, that she wouldn't believe what the demon said. There had to be a cure. She returned her attention to the vicar.

"We honor the dead of so many wars ... the First World War, the Second World War, Indochina, the Falklands, Kuwait ... Never let them be forgotten."

"And pray that the light stays on for all eternity. For all our sakes," Ian whispered putting his hand over Randi's. She squeezed it and settled back to listen to the church organ swell with a hymn of belief.



DARKHEART

by Deb Walsh

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He set the jade cup on the kitchen counter and frowned at it, as if willing it out of existence. Then he turned to look up expectantly at his companion, a lovely young woman with masses of curly brown hair captured loosely in a hair tie, and luminous, big brown eyes.

"It's beautiful. But I thought —" Dr. Natalie Lambert protested.

Detective Nicholas Knight nodded, turning the cup around to show her the carvings on the other side. "The cup I donated to the museum is still in its display case — I checked when the first one arrived."

"The first one! Nick ..." Natalie admonished. "How many have you gotten?"

He indicated the cupboard over the range, and she paused to glance at him a moment before reaching for the handle. Those youthful but ancient features revealed nothing of his thoughts or feelings. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, with a rugged, squarish face and a fashionable and permanent stubble of beard. Even after almost two years, it still shocked her to realize that his actual age was closer to 800 years, and that he had not aged a single day in nearly 770 of them. She shook herself to bring her attention back to the present. Pursing her lips, she tugged open the cabinet door. All in a row on the bottom shelf sat four intricately carved examples of Mayan art, all beautiful, all identical. She turned back to him questioningly.

"Fakes," he pronounced, a touch of sadness in his voice. It was too much to hope that even one might be genuine. "All of them."

"All? Have you had them examined —"

"Jade — real jade — has a different texture, a different surface temperature. Especially the jade used in sacred Mayan carvings. Someone went to a great deal of trouble to have these manufactured, but they are definitely made of a modern material, some sort of high-quality plastic or composite material. I should have the lab analyze them ..."

"But the workmanship —"

"Talented knockoffs. The art world is full of brilliant copyists. And no, I don't know who's been sending them," he added with a slight smile. "The first one arrived over five months ago, then one a month since. Always from a different postmark. Three from Central America, two from the States. This latest came from Cozumel. None were postmarked Toronto."

She smiled. Of course the detective in him would look for clues as to the source of these "gifts." "Obviously it's someone who knows you — perhaps someone who's known you for a very long time."

His answering smile was tinged with irony. In his particular case, a very long time was measured in lifetimes, centuries, not years. "Not many of ... my kind ... knew about the cups. Most aren't interested in the idea of mortality, so legends of reclaiming it ... No, only LaCroix and Janette knew about the dig. And I've already asked Janette. She doesn't know who's sending them, either."

"Daniel?" she asked tentatively.

A sour expression flitted across his face, his normal reaction to mention of the child vampire LaCroix and Janette had created. He shook his head. "I certainly never mentioned it. I doubt they would have — Janette couldn't remember saying anything to him about it, and her memory is exceptionally clear. Perhaps LaCroix, but I can't think why." Shrugging, he lifted the cup, turned it over, examining it a moment longer, then added it to its four brothers, and closed the cabinet. "If whoever is sending them keeps to schedule, I should have another by next week — I'll have to have a dinner party when I have eight." With that, he crossed the room and flung himself onto the sofa, tossing aside the lab reports Natalie had brought over for him to examine.

Natalie moved to follow him, then turned to reopen the cabinet instead. She lifted the mock-jade cups out of the cabinet, and ranged them in a row on the countertop, staring at them thoughtfully.

"They need blood to be used for divination. Preferably human," he commented wryly.

"Mmm," she replied absently. She picked up one cup, running her fingers over it carefully. Putting that one down, she picked up another, examining it in the same way. A smile slowly spread across her face. "Nick," she called.

Already immersed in a mid-day talk show, he looked up, confused. "What is it, Nat?" he asked.

"Come here. I want to show you something."

Shaking his head, he rose to join her again. She held out one of the cups for his examination. "I've looked these over thoroughly — they're not genuine."

"Feel it. Run your thumb along the base."

Humoring her, he did as he was told. She grinned at him, taking the cup away and replacing it with another. "Again."

He ran his thumb over the base of the second cup; his brows furrowed in concentration. "A chip ... in both."

"Right," she agreed enthusiastically. "Feel the others — they're all from a mold!"

"Okay, so they were all made from a mold ... my cup doesn't have a chip in the same place —"

"You're sure?"

"I had it for nearly 100 years, Nat — I know what it feels like."

"And the museum's cup, the one LaCroix destroyed?"

"I never had a chance to examine that one —"

"But Alyce had photos, drawings — couldn't you ask to see those?"

A slow smile grew on his face. "Yes. I'm sure I could. You don't think —"

"Someone has a real cup," she announced softly. "Perhaps even another pair."

"It's too much to hope for —"

"So — when did you say the next delivery's due?" she asked, her smile warm and encouraging.

* * *

In order to ensure time together to use Natalie's facilities to further investigate the packages, they had formulated a tale for the benefit of Nick's superior officer, Captain Joseph Stonetree. The story they concocted for Stonetree wasn't an elaborate one, but it did the trick. They convinced him that Nick was receiving mysterious parcels in the mail (true enough), and the contents appeared to be linked to a previous case (also factual), but they claimed the case was one from his days on the Chicago PD (totally fabricated). He grudgingly agreed to allow Nick some time with Natalie to investigate further.

For the past week, they'd met each evening to go over clues and possibilities.

At Nick's request, the museum had turned over facsimiles of Doctor Hunter's notes, sketches and photographs of both the Mayan cup Alyce had excavated, and newly-made notes and photographs of the cup Nick had donated in her memory. They'd gone over the photographs of each with a magnifying glass and even a jeweler's loop, but could find no hint of the chip present on the five cups in Nick's apartment in either genuine cup. They'd compared the photographs of Alyce's cup with the photographs of Nick's original cup, noting differences in the cups, deviations resulting from hand-carving, possibly by different artisans. They'd studied the photos against one of the new cups, and found several small but telling differences. They were satisfied that the mold used to make the five counterfeit cups had to have been made from a totally different cup. Finally, Natalie sent one of the cups out to a lab for material analysis.

Tonight, Natalie had ordered in Chinese, and Nick had joined her during a lull in his shift.

Nick had saved the packaging only from the last delivery, and that because he'd forgotten to throw it away. He'd found it while organizing his trash for pick-up earlier in the day. Natalie examined the box and plastic packaging carefully, but could find no clues linking it to anyone known to them. In fact, there was nothing to identify the sender in any way.

"What about the return address?" she questioned him around a mouthful of pan-fried noodles.

He shook his head, toying with his own small dish of rice. She gestured with her chopsticks — "C'mon, eat up — it won't hurt you," she added, grinning.

"Easy for you to say," he replied sourly, but gamely brought a forkful of white rice to his mouth. Grimacing, he stuck the fork in his mouth and swallowed the rice quickly. He shuddered slightly, but gave it another try. Having dutifully consumed two forkfuls of rice, he put down the fork and answered her question about return addresses.

"A different origination point, a different name each time. Mexico City. Philadelphia. Tijuana. Guatemala. From 'Frederick Catherwood.' 'John L. Stephens.' 'Manuel Gamio.' This one came from 'Tatiania Proskouriakoff' from Cozumel," he replied.

"Bless you," she grinned. "And do any of those names ring a bell?"

"Whole belfries. They're all archaeologists and scholars who have studied the Maya," he told her, a sly smile spreading across his features. "All are dead. I actually worked with Catherwood and Stephens — Catherwood's the artist who recorded so much of the early Mayan discoveries. Starting in 1839. It's thanks to him that our records are as good as they are today — pollution and weather erosion are quickly destroying the known artifacts." He shook his head sadly. "And who knows what else we haven't discovered yet."

"Oh," Natalie responded, once more struck by the gulf of time between them. And that was Nick's intention in mentioning the date he'd worked with Catherwood. She punched his arm playfully, "I suppose you knew Howard Carter, too, huh?"

His grin widened, and he let out a bark of laughter. "Only in passing. But I wasn't at Tut's tomb when he opened it."

She giggled. "No, you wouldn't have been — that was during the day, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Morning, before the desert got too hot. That must have been a sight," he added wistfully, growing momentarily serious once more. "And the pyramids are in as great a danger as the Mayan ruins. Acid rain, fluorocarbons, heavy metals — all are taking their toll." He shook his head. "I've missed a lot over the years."

"You've seen a lot, too. You know — you could become a historical biographer — you could tell their stories with more passion and accuracy than most scholars."

"I'll remember that the next time I have to move on."

She touched his arm gently and nodded toward the plate of rice he was toying with. "We're making progress. That may not be necessary."

"And besides, I have years before I need to make that choice. I know, we've gone over it before." For reassurance, whether for himself or for her he didn't know, he ate another forkful of rice. It still tasted awful, but it made her smile.

"Right. So what about the origination points — you know anyone in any of those cities?" While he considered his answer, she took the opportunity to stuff more Chinese food in her mouth, her cheeks bulging.

He only shook his head at the sight of her doing an impression of a chipmunk. She swallowed quickly, grinning. "Vampires move around a lot —"

"The Dorian Gray Syndrome, I know —"

"But I could ask Janette. She's remarkably well-connected with vampire society."

"She doesn't do too badly with mortal society, either — did you see the write-up on the Raven in the *Sunday Examiner*?"

He raised an eyebrow at that, daring her to finish the joke. Janette's club, the Raven, was home to a large segment of Toronto's vampire population, a safe place for them all, as well as being a popular night club.

"No, really — you never know what's going to be en vogue," she replied flippantly.

"It's Schanke's favorite night spot," he countered with a grin.

"I'm sure Janette is thrilled to death," Natalie commented dryly.

"In a manner of speaking, anyway," Nick said, deadpan. "Well, we seem to be getting nowhere fast with this. Could be anyone, vampire or mortal. Could be someone from my past —"

"The workers on the dig — your dig — might one of them ... well, could one of them ..."

"Have become a vampire? Hardly." His eyes became distant as he dredged up the memory of the last nights in the Central American encampment. "When the deaths started, the workers were terrified — LaCroix didn't go in for subtlety. There was no doubt how they were being killed. The surviving workers cut off the heads of the corpses before burying them. Just to make sure they didn't become vampires themselves. The native workers were a superstitious lot. And very thorough. No, it's not one of them. I'm sure of that."

Natalie put down her chopsticks and stared at her hands, one hand massaging the other. "You know, it's just possible that this has nothing to do with your being a vampire —" she held up a hand to forestall his amused protest. "No, I mean the choice of the cup. The cup Alyce unearthed was well publicized, as was your involvement in that case. And there was some press coverage of your donation to the memorial display. It's just possible that some nutcase has decided to ... reward you? Remind you? I don't know — it may just be the connection to the case that drove the choice of the cup."

He paused, considering. "Possible. It's not as though there's any hint of a threat — no hints at all, really. No note, no return address, nothing, just the cups surrounded by bubble-pack in cardboard boxes," he added, gesturing toward the uncommunicative box sitting on her desk.

"Well, if your secret benefactor sticks to schedule, you'll be getting another package —"

"Tomorrow. We'll know more tomorrow."

* * *

Natalie was at Nick's desk in time for the mail delivery the next day. Nick wasn't expected in for duty for several hours, and to pass the time, Natalie started to straighten up his desk, much to Schanke's amusement. The relationship between the coroner and his partner remained a mystery to him, although he could guess at a few things. Nat was a lovely young woman, and Nick — permanent five o'clock shadow aside — was a good-looking guy. And he did look good in leather, he had to admit. So what if his habits were a little weird and he couldn't go out in the sun? If there wasn't something going on between them, there should have been. The alternative was another cousin of Myra's and a blind date for Nat ... Schanke still smarted from the tongue-lashing he'd gotten from Natalie for the last one.

Shuddering with the memory, Schanke decided to stop thinking about matching Nat and Nick up and turned his attention back to the *National Intruder*. He wasn't allowed to read it at home, but anytime he was in charge of buying groceries, he was sure to pick up a copy to stow in the car where Myra wouldn't find it. Since Nick laughed at him whenever he saw him read it, he was always careful to finish it before Nick showed up for night shift. Some days, a guy just couldn't win.

He flipped through the pages, ignoring the story of aliens abducting Saskatchewan farmers, and found a reasonable-looking piece on miracle hair-growth products. He snorted over the list of ingredients in the latest grow-hair-quick product.

"What's that, Schanke?" Natalie asked, turning innocent-looking eyes on him.

He squirmed in his seat. "Oh, nothing, Nat. Just some light reading —"

"Aw, come on, Schank — lemme see!" she teased, getting up from Nick's desk and coming round behind him.

Schanke slammed the tabloid shut. "Really, Nat — it's nothing. Bird cage liner, really. Nat —" he protested as she snatched the paper from his hands and danced away with it.

Out of his reach, she opened the paper and read aloud, "'Scientists discover that a mixture of maple syrup and arrowroot will retard hair loss and even excite new hair growth'." She looked pitiably at Schanke, "Oh, come on, Schank — you don't believe this crap, do you?"

"Well, Nat, it's not that I believe it, no, not really," he said, coming around his desk toward her, "it's just that it's important to keep up on the latest innovations."

"In the *National Intruder*? Really!" She flipped to the next page, giggling, when an item caught her eye. "'Ancient Mayan Goddess Conducts ... Sacrificial Blood Rites in Lost City'?" She fell silent, reading the story in earnest. "Schank — could I borrow this? As a joke on Nick, I mean. He'll get a chuckle out of it, and I promise to return it immediately after he's seen it — you don't mind, do you?" she asked breathlessly, slipping away from him and out of the office. Once in the hall, she increased her speed to a trot, nearly running toward the elevator.

* * *

She punched the access code into the security system, and the elevator door opened. With the newspaper securely tucked into her bag, she stepped into the elevator, and ordered her heart to stop racing.

On the second level, she found Nick at the easel, tossing globs of paint at a speckled canvas. The window shutters were secured, and the only light in the loft came from electric lights scattered through the cavernous room.

"Hi, Nat," he greeted her cheerfully, taking a step back from his work and eyeing it critically. "What do you think — a little more yellow?"

She fairly marched into the room, extracting the folded-up newspaper from her bag as she walked. "Read this," she ordered.

He arched a skeptical eyebrow at her. "The *National Intruder*?" He started to hand it back to her, but she urged it back at him. "You've been hanging around Schanke too much — what'd he do, bring it into the squad room so Myra wouldn't catch him reading it at home again?" he chuckled.

"Yes, yes, he did. But read the article on page 17. Go on — read it!" She shrugged off her coat and dropped it in a chair, sitting on the arm to watch him.

Grinning and shaking his head simultaneously, he opened the tabloid to the specified page and started to skim. His grin faded to a frown and his eyes swept up to the beginning as he started to read the article carefully. "Lady Ix-Chel. The moon goddess of the Peten Maya. 'And she pierced her tongue with her teeth, and brought forth blood in honor of the old gods. Then she took of the blood of her followers, conjuring the Vision Serpent in a dance of ecstasy.' Whoever they interviewed knows something about our current understanding of Maya mythology." He turned back to the newspaper's masthead to reassure himself that he was in fact reading the *National Intruder.*

"Sound like someone you know?" she asked tightly.

"Not someone specific, but possibly someone of my kind," he agreed. "I've got to talk to the reporter who wrote this — damn, they don't list a byline. Whoever this Lady Ix-Chel is, she could be in big trouble." He moved swiftly toward the telephone.

"Big trouble?" she repeated, following him. "Why? I mean, it's possible that this person might be involved in the cups — but why would that place her in danger?"

He stopped, the telephone receiver poised in his hand. After a moment's thought, he replaced the receiver and led her to the couch. His expression was grave as he gestured for her to sit.

"Nick?"

"No one really knows where they come from, or how they know ... there are codes by which we vampires live. Codes that protect us as a species. The most important of those codes is that no mortal ever be in possession of proof of our existence."

"I have evidence — I have tissue cultures, blood samples —"

"Which you'll never share with another mortal. You must promise me, Nat, that you never will —"

"No, of course I won't. Who would believe me? And who would believe this article in the *National Intruder*? If I didn't know that vampires exist, I never would have thought twice —"

"This article, in itself, is meaningless. It may be just a crazy story. It may be just a crazy mortal, acting out fantasies of the Maya blood rites. But it may indicate that somewhere out there there is a vampire who is careless. Perhaps even intentionally reckless. Someone who has brought attention to herself, as a vampire. And if she allows a human to gather incontrovertible evidence of her nature ... the Enforcers will be forced to deal with her, and the mortal."

"Deal with them ... how?" Nat asked in a small voice.

Memories of a raging battlefield, a bloodless corpse, and the hissing of the Enforcers as they stepped forward to stake the photographer so that he would never rise again ... a videotape, steel doors torn from their hinges and crumpled like paper, a woman pleading for her moment in history ... Nick shook himself. "Terminally."

Mouthing an "Oh," Natalie leaned back on the couch, her eyes wide. "Terminally as in dead."

"Terminally as in drained of blood and pierced through the heart with a wooden stake," he elaborated, his voice flat.

"Oh. That kind of terminally."

He nodded. "I've got to talk to the reporter who wrote this. I've got to find out more. Even if it isn't a vampire involved, it may lead me to the original cup." He patted her hand absently, and got up to use the phone.

* * *

"Detective Knight!" greeted Frank Titus enthusiastically. He withdrew the cigar from his mouth, uncrossed his legs and swung them down from atop his desk and thrust his hand toward Nick. Knight took it, nodding. "What can you do for me?" he asked, waving Nick toward the chair in front of his desk.

"Ah," Nick said, smiling slightly. "I was hoping you could help me," he explained as he sat down.

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine?" The publisher of the *National Intruder* grinned. "Shoot. And try to make it short — I got a deadline to meet."

Nick pulled the folded-up newspaper out of his jacket pocket and handed it over to Titus, the article in question on the outer fold. Titus glanced at it a moment, then looked up at Nick. "So? Good stuff, huh? All those fancy terms kinda lend a little class to the paper, don't you think? And the punters love stuff about lost civilizations. Add in a little blood sacrifice — got a winner. So what's it to Toronto PD?" he handed back the newspaper.

"This story ... is it for real?" Nick asked, putting the paper back in his pocket.

"Hey, we got journalistic standards to maintain!" Frank Titus protested with offended pride. "Like I told you last time you were in — the truth will out."

"Hmm. 'Aliens Kidnapped My Cat'?"

"Well, it sells papers. Keeps the bucks comin' in so we can do the real investigative journalism," he shrugged. "What's your interest in the Mayan goddess?"

"There are some similarities with a case I worked on a year or so ago. An unsolved case. Our perp escaped. Woman. Obsessed with ancient Mayan culture. This could be her."

The publisher nodded, his eyes gleaming with avarice. "Murder? You're homicide, right?" Nick nodded. "Could be good. Throw in a little Satan-worshipping, and you got yourself some gold, my man. To the tune of $25,000 if it's printable. And what do you want from me?"

"The name and phone number of the reporter who wrote this. I'd like to ask him or her some more questions, maybe look over the notes —"

"You thinkin' of goin' down there — 'cos if you are, we might be able to work something out —"

"I think I'd like to see what I could learn from the writer, first," Nick replied mildly.

"Sure. Sure," he answered, scribbling down some words on a pad of paper. He tore the sheet off his pad, started to hand it to Nick, then snatched it back. "I got your word if anything comes of this, we get an exclusive?"

Nick's hand hung poised in the air to take the paper. He looked at the publisher and nodded. "If anything comes of it that you could publish, I'll be in touch."

Frank Titus recognized a qualified reply when he heard it. In all likelihood, he'd get squat from this detective. But he could get his writer to follow-up on the questions Knight asked. One way or another, he'd get something out of the deal. With a satisfied smirk, he gave the slip of paper to Knight and sat back in his office chair.

"Thanks," Nick said, rising. The sheet of paper was carefully folded and stowed in his trousers pocket. He extended his hand to the publisher, who grinned and shook it.

"Keep in touch," warned the publisher good-naturedly.

"Right."

* * *

"So I've got an appointment to talk with Edmund Blaylock, the writer, tomorrow evening. I'm meeting him at Janette's place."

"You think that's wise — what if he notices something funny about Janette's girls?" Nat was asking as she worked on a corpse brought in from a convenience store homicide.

"It was his choice — apparently he's a regular," Nick answered, grinning. "I called Janette. Says he's a little weird, but harmless. He's in there at least once a week. Tomorrow's his regular night."

She nodded, lifting a bullet out of the corpse's chest with a pair of forceps. "And no sign of this month's package?"

"Unless Schanke claimed it and is saving it for my birthday ... no. It's strange. Every month for the past five months, they've arrived on exactly the same date. Now that I'm waiting for it, nothing." He settled down on the edge of her desk, watching her work.

"Well ... hey, there's some protein drink in the thermos over there — I want you to drink it," she ordered, leaning in more closely to guide her scalpel around the area of the entry wound.

Nick grimaced, but did as he was told, pouring out a small amount of the yeasty-smelling concoction into the thermos cap. He sipped gingerly at the fluid, wrinkling his nose and swallowing hard. He shuddered, trying to keep it down. "Where do you come up with this stuff?" he demanded.

"Nutritionist friend. Drink it!" she commanded.

Making another face, he downed the protein mix in one gulp. "Gaah. What's the verdict?"

"Wound's clean. This is what killed him," she announced, holding up the bullet she'd removed. "Although cholesterol probably would have gotten him in the end. Geeze — did this guy live at the local Burger King, or what?" she asked, waving her hand at the corpulent corpse.

"Dunno." He screwed the thermos lid back on and slipped off the desk edge. "Gotta go — Donut Don awaits!"

"Sounds like fun," she said absently, so intent on her examination of the corpse that she barely acknowledged his departure.

* * *

Nick arrived at the Raven the next night two hours after opening. The bouncer let him pass without a second look, focusing his attention instead on the crowd of people clamoring for entrance to Toronto's latest most popular nightspot. Inside the club, the heavy beat of funk music pounded up from the floor, colored lights swirled and flashed in time to the music, and the dance floor was packed with gyrating patrons, mortal and immortal. One in particular, a slender young woman heavily made-up and wearing a skin-tight leather mini-dress and spike heels, watched his entrance with a predatory hunger.

Unaware of the scrutiny of the woman, he moved further into the club and found Janette in her favorite spot, at the bar with a good view of the dance floor. Even he had no idea how old she truly was, not after over 700 years of passion, anger, laughter, and friendship. She still looked as seductive and ethereal as the day he'd met her in 1228. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe chignon, and her full lips were painted a deep red, as always. She was, as she had always been for him, incredibly beautiful and desirable. She caught sight of him, took a long drag from her cigarette and smiled at him through the smoke. Her eyes twinkled with the knowledge that after so long, she could still inspire attraction in him. Like him, she was oblivious to the female who maneuvered herself on the dance floor to be just out of human earshot of the pair.

"Ah, Nicholas," Janette purred, as always pronouncing the name in its French variant. He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Ever the gentleman. On duty, no less."

"Afraid so, Janette. Have you seen him?" he asked over the music.

She jerked her head in the direction of a lone man sitting at a table on the edge of the dance floor. He was older than most of the human denizens of the club, and a full ashtray and a near-empty bottle sat on the table before him. Nick stared at him a moment then returned his attention to Janette.

"He looks at the pretty young girls, drinks a little too much, and smokes far too much. But he's harmless. Never bothers anyone, just sits there, drinks, smokes, and looks."

"And the girls don't bother him?" he asked, smiling.

"Never. You know they're not that stupid." She heaved a sigh. "No. The world has changed for us." She lifted her glass, swirling the deep red blood, laced with wine. "Once we were hunters, taking our prey and drinking our fill. Now we live alongside them, pretending to be like them. And the blood comes prepackaged and purchased from the black market. One can't really complain about the vintage, can one?"

"No," he chuckled. He kissed her on the cheek and slipped away, threading his way toward Edmund Blaylock. The dancing woman shifted her location once more to remain within sight of Knight and his companion.

The reporter looked up at Nick's approach. His eyes were dull from too many nights of sitting in bars drinking, and a slight tremor shook the hand extended to Nick in greeting. Nick guessed his age at somewhere approaching 50; his face was lined and craggy, a ruggedly handsome face on a man less inclined to drink heavily.

"Detective Knight. Have a seat. Drink?" he offered, lifting the bottle.

"No thanks — I'm on duty," Knight replied easily.

"You don't mind if I do ...?" Nick shook his head. Blaylock smiled slightly and topped off his glass, pausing to take a swig before directing his attention to the homicide detective. "What can I do for you, Detective?"

"You article on the Mayan goddess in the *National Intruder.* I wanted to get some more details."

"You don't strike me as the sort who reads the *National Intruder.* Bathroom reading?" Blaylock asked philosophically.

"My partner. He reads it in the squad room because his wife won't let him read it at home."

Blaylock nodded grimly. "Of course. There was a time when people read my work for illumination." He raised his glass in salute. "Now it's just a guilty pleasure." He drank deeply, then poured more whisky into the glass. Nick was struck by a sadness for the man; he had no doubt that it was Blaylock's taste for alcohol that had put a stop to his more legitimate journalistic career.

"Well. What would you like to know?" Blaylock asked, setting his glass down with a clunk. "Best ask me now, while I'm still sober enough to recall the answers."

Nick withdrew a small notebook and pencil from his coat pocket, flipped it open, and began, "Your article had some fairly authentic descriptions of what Mayanists believe to be Classic Mayan practices. Where did you get your information?"

"Ah. I have an old friend in the Antiquities Department in Belize. He was involved in a sting operation to catch some black marketeers dealing in Pre-Columbian art. A native laborer attempted to sell a particularly fine funerary mask to their front man. Lovely thing — jade with inlaid obsidian and shell. He showed me a picture," he explained. "When my friend questioned the laborer on its source, that was the story he told. Repeatedly."

"Hmm. Any idea of where this mythical city might be?"

Nick had attempted to contain the excitement from his voice, but Blaylock noted it just the same. "What's your interest, Detective? You said something about a murderess obsessed with the Maya. I can't recall reading anything about such a lady, and I assure you, I do keep up with the news."

"We kept the details from the press," Nick hedged. "You know how the crazies like to latch onto the weird stuff."

"Yes, that's right — you are the detective who solved the 'Vampire Murders', aren't you?" Blaylock was thoughtful for a moment. "You *did* solve that case, didn't you? This isn't somehow connected — the blood rites? Apparently not all the workers returned from the city. At least, that's how the laborer's story goes. He'd been foreman on earlier digs in the region, and most of his crew has disappeared."

"Dig? Your article said nothing about a dig."

"Hmm. That's why he was out in the jungle. On a dig. Says he can't remember much, not even who the sponsor was. Just that they found a city hidden in the overgrowth, and that's where the goddess came to them."

"And where was this dig?" Nick pursued, no longer attempting to mask the excitement in his voice.

"Altan-something," Blaylock replied, waving his hand vaguely. He took another drink to lubricate his throat.

"Altuncanul?" Nick prompted.

A slow smile spread across Blaylock's haggard features. "Yes. That's it. Altuncanul." His brow furrowed a moment. "Wasn't that the site that archaeologist excavated, the one who was killed when you solved the 'Vampire Murders'?"

"Doctor Alyce Hunter," Nick agreed slowly, his expression distant. "Alyce," he whispered. "It's not possible." He shook his head.

"Not possible?" repeated Blaylock wistfully. "Oh, anything is possible, Detective." To reassure himself of that fact, he filled up his glass and downed it all in one swallow. "I can give you the name of my friend, if you like. You can confirm all this with him. I always like to cooperate with the police. One never knows when one might need a friend among them."

Nick shook himself and asked for the name and phone number. His mind was still clouded with the implications of Blaylock's story. Blaylock scribbled the information down in Nick's notebook and smiled benignly.

Blaylock himself was well on his way to being royally drunk. He was a quiet drunk, melancholy and saddening. He swayed to his feet, bowed slightly to Nick, and bid the detective good night. Picking his path in the careful manner of career drunks, he made his way out of the club. A slender shadow detached itself from the dance floor and followed him silently.

A few moments later, Janette joined Nick at the table, gesturing for her bartender to come over and clear away the debris remaining from Blaylock.

"Did you learn anything useful?" she asked after the bartender had gone, settling herself in the chair vacated by the journalist.

"Useful?" Nick repeated like an expletive. "I don't know," he added, shaking his head again. "It sounds as though —"

He was cut off by a high-pitched scream and shouts from the entrance to the club. Pulling his service revolver in one smooth motion as he raced toward the door, Janette on his heels, Nick shrugged off the confusion Blaylock had engendered in him. At the door, he ordered the crowd to disperse as Janette commanded her bouncers to move everyone from the street into the club and watch them. Together they rushed out into the night toward the source of the scream.

In the alley by the club, the crumpled figure of a man lay sprawled, half-in and half-out of the pool of light thrown by the street light. They could both smell the scent of fresh blood, and they each struggled to contain the vampire in themselves; now was not the time to reveal their true natures, not with so many mortals about.

Nick knelt by the body, checking for signs of life. Blaylock was dead, his body still warm. Nick turned the man's face to reveal blood still oozing from puncture marks on his neck. Blood was splashed on his face and shirt collar, and a small pool had already collected on the street beneath his head.

"Call the police. And call Nat," Nick ordered.

"I don't suppose this is going to help business," Janette commented ironically.

"No, I don't suppose so. Would one of your girls —"

"Of course not! I told you — they're not that stupid!" She glanced at the blood staining the dead man's face and clothes.

"How can you be sure —"

"I will speak with them, Nicholas, if that makes you feel better. I assure you, if one of them has fed on fresh blood, I will be able to tell. I can still tell the difference," she reminded.
"Nor are they so wasteful or sloppy. Especially not now —"

Nick wheeled on her and caught her arm. She brought it up defensively, glaring at him. "Especially not now ... *what*?" he demanded.

"You're hurting me," she complained, glancing away.

"I doubt that. What are you afraid of, Janette?" he pursued, pulling her arm so she was pressed against his chest.

"Nicholas —"

"Janette — what is it?"

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Opening her eyes again, she looked into his. "The Enforcers."

He dropped her arm and took a step back. She massaged her arm and watched him. "The Enforcers?" he repeated weakly, images crowding in on him from the recent and not-so-recent past. "They're here?" She nodded. "How?"

"They watch. No one knows how they know, but they do. There is danger here," she indicated the cooling corpse in the alley. "Danger to us all. You knew that when you started looking for that woman. You've met them already."

"Twice."

"You know why they're here. If this woman has anything to do with you, they may not be so lenient with you this time." Her voice was full of sadness, as though she expected this would be the last time she saw him.

Knight's eyes fell on the corpse again, and he stood there studying it. At length he looked up at her again and said, "It may be someone I know. I'm not sure. But I can't imagine how ... she's dead."

"So are we," Janette reminded gently.

"Natalie would disagree," he countered with a faint smile.

"Natalie is a rare mortal." She stepped toward him and touched his face. "You must find this threat, eliminate it, before they do." She smiled suddenly, and he looked at her curiously. "You are not merely a policeman to the mortals. You are *our* policeman."

That seemed to calm him. He shook himself slightly and slid back into his role of detective. "You go in. Have someone call. And keep everyone together. I'm going to have a look around."

"All right," she acquiesced. "You'll explain it to the fire marshall I hope — we're going to exceed code if everyone stays in the club."

The expression he turned on her was not amused. "All right. I'm going."

She moved swiftly and gracefully back into the club, leaving him standing by the cooling corpse.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up; he felt the presence of something in the darkness beyond. Something ominous and implacable. "Damn!" he swore into the night.

* * *

The uniforms arrived shortly thereafter, quickly setting up a police line behind which lay the body. Then they turned to the task of taking names and phone numbers from patrons of the Raven, and questioning the people

who had been lined up waiting to get in the club when the murder took place. Natalie drove up at the scene just behind the police detail. She flashed her ID for the officer on duty, and hurried over to meet Nick and Janette by the body.

When Nick showed her the throat wounds, her eyes darted immediately to Janette.

"Why does everyone insist on thinking we are so stupid? No, this was not done by any of *my* regulars!" she retorted angrily.

"Sorry," Nat apologized. "Anyone you might know?" she asked, straightening.

"No." She pulled a cigarette out of her case and lit it thoughtfully. She blew the smoke away from them. "No. None of the old crowd would make a kill so close to the club. Too likely to draw attention to us. We *do* look out for each other, you know."

"None of the old crowd," repeated Natalie. "Someone new, perhaps?"

"I know of no one. But then, it's not possible to know everyone. Some of us have been foolish enough to think we could bring others over," she explained with a pointed look at Nick. "It rarely works out. It takes a very special type of mortal to become immortal."

Natalie's face clouded at the reminder of her brother's change when Nick had brought him over to the dark. It had been a short stay indeed, since Richard had been unable to handle the power that had suddenly been his. She shook herself. "Obviously I'll handle this one myself."

"What'll you put as cause of death, Nat?" Nick asked, his own expression troubled.

"Knife wound — a slice to the jugular would explain at least some of the bloodloss the mortician is sure to notice. I can't really start another scare in the city over 'vampire killers' — but you're going to have to find whoever did this. One I can contain — more than that, and it may be out of my hands."

"I like your mortal friend, Nick," Janette said, smiling. "She knows her priorities." With that, she turned but paused, facing them again, her eyes on Nick. "You know, it could be someone with a grudge."

"Against you, Janette? Do you have any enemies?" Natalie questioned her.

She shrugged. "Who doesn't? But none of my enemies are stupid." With that, she pivoted on her heel and headed back to the club.

"I'm flattered ... I think," Natalie commented wryly, watching the proprietor of the Raven weave her way around the policemen at the scene.

"You should be," Nick replied with a grin. "Janette doesn't usually bother to get to know mortals enough to like or dislike them."

She turned back to Nick, her expression serious. "What do you think?"

"I think we've got a problem," he answered grimly. "I believe Janette — none of the vampires who frequent her club would be foolish enough to endanger the club — it's a haven for us all."

"Then it must be someone from out of town — an outsider?" she asked, closing up her medical bag. He didn't answer, and she shrugged. "I'll take the victim — Blaylock? — back to the office, do the post mortem on him. Although I have no doubt as to the cause of death." She glanced down at the sad-faced corpse, caught in his last terror-filled moment of life and shook her head. "I'll never get used to this kind of death."

Nick's hand shot out and grabbed her arm. She winced at the strength of the grip and he lessened his hold. "Be careful, Nat."

"Why — you know who did this, don't you?"

"I have an idea. It's a crazy idea," he added, shaking his head. "It can't possibly be right. But be careful — Blaylock was killed after he left me. Whoever did this could be —"

"Could be whoever's sending the cups. Could be after you," she finished.

"Could be after the people I know. The *mortals* I know."

She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I'll be safe at Headquarters. Who's going to try something in a building full of police?" She put on a brave smile for his benefit, but he could tell he'd frightened her.

"Be careful," he repeated forcefully.

"All right, all right — I'll be careful. You find who did this," she ordered him. She gestured to the attendants waiting by the ambulance, and they moved forward to bag the body. She sketched a mock salute at Nick, got into her car, and left the scene.

* * *

After Natalie had left to return to Headquarters with the ambulance carrying Blaylock's corpse following behind, Nick joined the uniformed policeman taking statements from the people from the line outside the Raven. "Anybody see anything?"

The blue, a patrolman by the name of Joe Grange, shook his head. "Nothing, Nick. One woman said she saw a woman leave the bar right behind Blaylock, but she said the woman headed in the opposite direction. Unlikely she's our perp."

"Description?" Nick demanded.

"Uh ... slender, late twenties, maybe early thirties — who can tell these days? Dark hair, kinda punked, leather mini-dress, those mega-high heels. Lotta make-up. You know — kind of like every other woman who comes to this joint. This is the place the *Examiner* said was the trendiest club in Toronto? Heck, I'll stick with the local."

"You do that, Joe," Nick answered, clapping him on the back. "It might be safer."

"Nick!" called out a familiar voice. "Hey, partner — what's happenin'?"

"Schanke. What brings you here?" Rolling his eyes theatrically at Grange, he walked over to join his partner.

"Want some?" Schanke offered, lifting his coffee cup to Nick. Knight shook his head, as Schanke had expected. "So what's the drill?"

"Nat just left with the victim, a 50-ish reporter for the *National Intruder* who was killed just after leaving the club. Knife to the throat, slashed the jugular," Nick explained. "No one seems to have seen the murderer, no murder weapon, no visible clues, just a dead man and a lot of blood on the pavement."

"Messy. Guy have any enemies?"

"We'll have to ask his publisher. You want to take care of that tomorrow?"

Schanke shrugged. "Sure. How's Janette holding up — a murder on her doorstop isn't going to be good for business."

"It's hard to tell — a place like this, the sensation might actually attract people. She's holding up as she always does — beautifully."

That last comment caught Schanke's attention. "Hey — there something goin' on between you and her? Come on — you can tell me — I'm your partner."

"It's ancient history." Nick chuckled. "Very ancient. We're just good friends now."

"Oh. Well, I'll go pay my respects. What about you?"

"I'm going to question her staff."

* * *

Back in her lab, Natalie began her examination of the body of Edmund Blaylock, carefully studying the puncture marks on his neck. Painstakingly, she took samples for analysis, sure that she would find human — or at least close to human — saliva in the wounds. These were definitely teeth marks, made with particularly sharp and pointed teeth. Fangs. She shuddered involuntarily. A nasty way to die — conscious and terrified. Was there any good way to die, she reminded herself. She carefully cut away tissue to mask the puncture wounds, making the wound appear to have been inflicted by a sharp, nondescript knife.

The lab was quiet around her; Grace, her assistant, was on vacation for the week, enjoying the sun and margharitas in Cancun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd really taken a vacation — a real vacation. That week off after her encounter with that crazy date rapist hadn't been very restful — nightmares had wakened her every night, and finally, she'd returned to work no less rested than she'd been before she'd gone.

The coroner's office night shift was really just a skeleton crew, although they probably got more business after dark than during the daylight hours. The outer office to her lab was dark; Fred had called in sick earlier in the evening, apologetic but clearly too sick to come to work. Elsewhere in the building, police officers, computer technicians, and other civil servants on the night shift were at work, but in her own little world, she was alone. She remembered Nick's admonition and shivered a little.

"Oh, come on!" she chided herself. "You're acting like a baby." To settle her nerves, she set down her instruments and went to pour herself a cup of tea. She turned back to her examination of the corpse of Edmund Blaylock and found herself face to face with the amber glowing eyes of a female vampire.

* * *

Nick's interrogation of Janette's staff and the vampires who lived in the lower basement of the Raven revealed nothing. No one had noticed anything untoward; it had been a night of business as usual at the Raven. Questioning of the patrons of the club lasted most of the night, and when the police detail was wrapping up, the first hints of dawn were appearing in the sky.

"Schanke, I've got to go," Nick announced to his partner.

Schanke looked up at the sky and smiled. "I keep tellin' you — y'gotta invest in nuclear force sun screen."

"Yeah, well, none of that really works for me. Look — watch your back, okay, Schank?"

"Hey, you know me — always on the alert!"

Nick chuckled and slapped Schanke on the shoulder, then made his way to his car. If he floored it, he'd make it to his place before the sun was up.

"Hey, can I get another cup of coffee?" he heard Schanke call out as he drove away.

* * *

Pulling the Caddy up to the curb, Nick had the recurring sense of something watching. Whatever that something was, he could feel anger ... and death. Still sitting behind the steering wheel, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves and glanced up at his building. He did a doubletake; on the second floor where his apartment was located, one of the tall windows was smashed. He rushed out of his car, did a cursory check of the pavement — no shattered glass littered the walkway — and raced into the building. His senses were all screaming *danger!*, no longer focussed purely on the watcher. He rapidly punched in his access code, hurried into the apartment, leaving the door open, and slammed the controls for the window shutters just as the first rays of sunlight began to filter through the panes.

"Very impressive," came a soft, feminine voice from somewhere above him. He looked up at the upper floor walkway, and saw a dark, slender shape separate itself from the shadows, a white-coated form in its grasp. Natalie!

"Hello, Nick," the figure purred. "Aren't you glad to see me?" She lifted into the air, Natalie still held fast, her mouth covered by the figure's hand. "Don't you recognize me? Let me come down into the light." Levitating over the guardrail, she gracefully pirouetted down to the main level of the apartment.

She stood before Knight, slim, dark-haired, face made up to resemble the clientele of the Raven. The strap of a large leather bag was slung across her chest, the bag hanging at her side. She smiled, revealing sharp, white fangs. Natalie darted fear-filled eyes at Nick, imploring him to do something.

"Alyce," Nick whispered, his eyes wide. "LaCroix killed you —"

"LaCroix gave me life," she corrected smoothly. "Something you refused to do."

"But your funeral — your cremation —"

She chuckled. "Even your coroner friend here couldn't tell that I wasn't truly dead. I simply waited until I could get out of the body drawer, found a suitable replacement, and went my merry way. Surely you, as a vampire of ... advanced age ... can figure out how."

Nick nodded. "Let Natalie go," he said softly.

"Why would I want to do that, Nick? I went to so much trouble to get her. Didn't I, Natalie?" she asked, stroking Natalie's exposed neck with her forefinger. Natalie tensed at the touch, closing her eyes tightly.

"What do you want, Alyce?"

"I have unfinished business here in Toronto."

"You killed Blaylock." Alyce nodded, smiling. "Why?"

"I followed you to that club again, overheard your conversation. No one noticed me — how could a vampire be discovered among so many?" She smiled again, revealing delicate, sharp fangs. "I didn't know who'd written that article, but he got some of the details of my biography wrong. He had to be corrected. And he was so delicious," she added, grinning wickedly. "Although I could wish he'd drunk a better grade of whiskey — it does leave a strange aftertaste."

"What else?"

"Why, you, of course," she replied silkily. "You denied me all this," she pointed out, lifting into the air again, still holding Natalie tight. "You preferred to let me die than compromise your precious ethics." She rose higher and higher, spiralling slowly toward the upper walkway. "You consigned me to death, Nick. LaCroix gave me the gift of life — you tell me, to whom should I be grateful?"

She alighted on the walkway and stared down at him. "Whom should I love? And whom should I hate? A decision to be made, Nick. And here's a decision for you —" she put her hand in the leather bag, extracted a Mayan cup, and held it up over the emptiness beyond the railing. "Do you truly wish to be human, Nick? I know you still have your original cup. I found another, not far from Altuncanul. Oh yes, I returned there. And what I found — this cup is only the beginning!"

"What do you want, Alyce?" he demanded angrily.

"No, Nick — what do *you* want? The cup ... or the girl?" She laughed. "Such symmetry, don't you think? LaCroix asked you the same question, and you chose the girl. And then you let the girl die. I don't think you truly want to be human again, Nick. I think it's just a romantic fantasy that prevents you from enjoying what you truly are. Perhaps Natalie would enjoy it more than you do — shall we find out?"

Her fingers around the Mayan cup opened, the cup falling as she bared her fangs again and bent her head toward Natalie's neck. Natalie let out a shriek and began to struggle in earnest; she'd remained still all this time to avoid just this and she wasn't going to let Alyce take her life. Nick launched himself from the first level to the second. As the cup crashed to the floor, shattering into fragments, he wrenched Alyce's arms away from Nat just as her fangs grazed Nat's neck. "Run, Nat!" he commanded, his own fangs bared, his eyes blazing yellow. "Run!"

Nick held Alyce's arms at her sides while Natalie escaped, but the female vampire merely smiled at him. "Things haven't changed, have they, Nick? Still gallantly choosing the girl over your own humanity. You still don't know what you really want."

"I won't let you hurt her — this is between you and me, Alyce. Can't you understand — I didn't want to curse you like I've been cursed — I loved you too much for that —"

"Love! Was it love that made you decide to *let* me die? I told you — I wanted this! I wanted to watch civilization grow and change. I wanted this power!" To illustrate, she suddenly thrust her arms upward, breaking Nick's hold. She rose above him, hatred contorting her features.

"You're still weak, too. I fed only a few hours ago. When was the last time you fed? On *human* blood — not that cow's swill you have in the refrigerator." Her smile broadened. "Oh, when we let ourselves in, I took the liberty of poking about a bit. You know as well as I do that an archaeologist can learn a great deal from domestic arrangements."

While Nick and Alyce were grappling on the upper level, Natalie hadn't wasted time, racing down the stairs two at a time. She'd hurried to the case where Nick kept Joan d'Arc's cross, flipping back the lid and lifting out the cross. "Alyce!" she bellowed now, holding the cross up toward the two vampires.

Alyce hissed and flattened herself against the wall. She shimmied upward onto the ceiling, her eyes intent on the cross in Natalie's hands. Just as she dropped down from the ceiling, Nick catapulted himself from the walkway, catching her in mid-air. They wrestled, Alyce twisting to throw off Knight. Finally, she succeeded, sending him careening into the wall where he impacted into a framed print with a crash of glass and a curse.

Alyce righted herself in the air, snarling at Natalie. Natalie stood her ground, holding the cross up defiantly. "I know you can't come any closer," Natalie announced. "I know what this will do to your kind."

"Put down the cross," Alyce ordered, her voice laden with vampire glamour.

Natalie's hand faltered, her eyes growing distant, but she took command of herself and shook off the influence. "You forget — my best friend is a vampire. I know all the tricks," she pointed out. She glanced over at the wall where Nick had fallen; he was getting up slowly, his attention focused on Alyce. He had reverted to human appearance and gestured for Natalie to keep her talking.

"Best friend!" Alyce snorted, dropping gracefully to the floor across the room from Natalie. "I've watched the way you look at each other. You're the reason he refused to make me a vampire. You're the reason he wanted me dead!"

"No, Alyce," Nick said calmly. He dusted broken glass from his shoulder and took a step forward to stand beside her. "Why can't you understand — I hate what I am. I loved you — I couldn't turn you into something I hate."

She turned toward him, her face full of pain, the vampire suddenly gone. "How could you love me and let me die? How? How could you deny me this?"

"Deny you what? A life in the shadows? A life of killing, of pain? To never see the sun again —"

"I told you — I love the night! The sun means nothing to me —"

"To never truly love another? To be a shadow of what you were —"

"A shadow! I returned to Altuncanul, I organized a team, we excavated the site —" she dug into her bag, pulling out another Mayan cup. Nick's face betrayed his belief that *this* cup was genuine. His hand reached out for it, but she snatched it back, dropping it back in the bag. "I found another cup. I found another city, Nick. An unknown site — the find of a lifetime! The century! Undisturbed, intact — and Nick, there was a library there, a library of Mayan bark-paper books! Sealed in a stone sarcophagus — in amazing condition! The Spaniards hadn't made it that deep into the jungle! Nick, it will totally change our understanding of the Maya! When I publish —"

"You can't publish, Alyce. You're dead," he reminded gently. "You can never publish."

With a flare of rage, Alyce resumed her vampire appearance for a moment. "You denied me life! You'd deny me this, too? The finest achievement of my professional career?"

"Your career is over. Your death was too highly publicized, your life too closely connected to the Maya. You can never go public with this find, Alyce. It's more than your life is worth," he added sadly.

"It *is* my life, Nick! You, of all people, should understand that!"

He closed his eyes and inclined his head. He opened his eyes again, and reached out for her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I do understand, Alyce. Believe me, I do. But you must understand — there are rules. There is a code — you can never let the mortals know what you are."

Again, the vampire in Alyce faded. She stood close to Nick, her face tilted up at him, her expression entreating. "You can tell them ... you can tell them that I went into hiding," she suggested urgently, her hands reaching out for him in supplication. "Witness protection program, threats to my life — something — this is too important to bury again, Nick! You can have the cup — only you must help me —"

He took her in his arms, closing his eyes tightly as he pressed his face against her hair. "I can't, Alyce. Not to go public. That life is over — you have to start a new one," he whispered gently.

She flung him from her. "No! That is my life, my only life — I'm an archaeologist, a scientist! What good is it if I can't publish?"

"You can't. Doctor Alyce Hunter is dead."

"I can have plastic surgery, become someone else —"

He touched her face gently. "Look at how the burns you suffered have healed, Alyce. Your skin is flawless. You'd heal from the surgery in a matter of days. This is who you are. You can't look like anyone else —"

Natalie observed this exchange silently, still holding the cross. But while Alyce's attention was focused on Nick, she'd moved in a semi-circle around them, out of Alyce's line of sight, toward Nick's work table by his easel. Over Alyce's head, her eyes met Nick's; he shook his head slightly, and she closed her eyes to indicate her understanding. The cross of Joan D'Arc was still held tightly in one hand; her other hand closed over the handle of a large brush.

Alyce caught the exchange and shoved Nick aside, whirling to face Natalie again, her fangs once more bared to rend human flesh.

"I can be her death!" Alyce swore. She launched herself at the pathologist.

"Alyce, no!" Nick yelled.

Natalie dropped to the floor, rolling. As Alyce lunged for her, she dropped the cross and snapped the paint brush handle, exposing a sharp point of jagged wood. She thrust it up into Alyce's chest as the vampire attempted to tear open her throat.

Alyce lurched backward, hands scrabbling at the makeshift stake protruding from her bleeding chest. Her face was contorted in horror and pain as she pivoted back toward Nick. "Help me ..." she whispered, a thin trickle of dark blood — her own blood — oozing down her chin. "Nick ..." She fell to her knees, her hands raised in supplication. Natalie snatched the leather satchel and pulled it off the writhing vampire, scuttling backward under the work table. She watched in horror as smoke rose from Alyce as she seemed to fold in on herself. Natalie closed her eyes to the sight, memories of Richard's death still too recent to set aside. "All I wanted ..." Alyce fell silent as the smoke thickened and she faded in a brilliant white light.

Nick stumbled to his knees, hands touching the spot where Alyce had been. "Alyce ..." He lifted his tear-stained face up to Natalie, who still clutched the satchel protectively. "I failed, Nat. I failed again," he whispered hoarsely. She gathered him in her arms and held him, rocking, as the two of them indulged their respective griefs. She looked up over his head and saw two figures standing in the open doorway. Male, impeccably dressed, with skin the color of palest alabaster, eyes golden and feral, and glistening, brutal-looking fangs, they watched. They held Natalie's gaze for a moment, their expressions unreadable. She had the feeling that they were examining her, deep into her cell structure. One held a stake poised in his upraised hand. The other shook his head, and touched the first one's shoulder. With a glance at Nick, they turned and left without uttering a single word.

* * *

"Let me see that," Nick said, turning Natalie's face to the side. "She got you, but you're okay. A little alcohol or hydrogen peroxide should clean that up," he added, examining the wound left by Alyce's fangs.

He moved slowly, like an old man, toward the bathroom to collect the necessary supplies. Natalie busied herself with a dustpan and brush to sweep up the remains of the Mayan cup Alyce had smashed. She was still shaking, as much from her encounter with Alyce as from the sight of the two enigmatic vampires who had disappeared only minutes before.

"That one's fake, too," Nick told her, reentering the room. "She was too much of an archaeologist to damage a rare antiquity."

Natalie held up a shard of the cup, the lighter color of its shattered face betraying its modern construction. "Which means what — the other one she had in her bag is the real McCoy?"

Nick shrugged. His hopes had been raised so many times, he daren't hope again. And the confrontation with Alyce — and experiencing her death a second time — had left him drained. Much like Natalie.

Nick hadn't the heart to rifle through Alyce's bag, but Natalie had no such compunctions. She needed to keep busy while she worked through the conflicting thoughts and emotions that battled within her. While he watched, she went through the satchel, placing each of the items on Nick's coffee table. She found a return airline ticket to Belize City, a passport in the name of "Anna Duval," newly-purchased make-up and a receipt for it from a drugstore chain, another receipt from a trendy clothing store, and a binder full of notes, diagrams, photographs, and rubbings. And the cup. This she handed to Nick for his examination.

"Well?"

He nodded, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "It's real," he breathed. "Genuine."

"And will it work with the one in the museum?"

The face he turned to her was a riot of emotions: fear, elation, grief, dread. But above all, hope. "Only one way to find out."

She nodded, smiling, and squeezed his hand enthusiastically. "Tomorrow. We'll go to the museum and talk with the new curator then." He smiled in agreement.

Now that Natalie had actually arranged the contents of Alyce's bag, Nick picked over them curiously. With the evidence arrayed before them, they could begin to piece together what had happened in the last year. They decided that Alyce had obviously taken over the life of the woman who had taken her place in her coffin, a woman who had probably been just visiting Toronto from Montreal. They agreed that if they checked the missing persons reports, if not here, then in Montreal, Anna Duval would show up on them, case unsolved.

In fact, Nick was fairly sure she had not been reported missing in Toronto. He normally kept half-an-ear open regarding missing persons, since in days past, missing persons often meant his kind preying on the lost and the alone. He told Natalie that he couldn't recall hearing the name "Anna Duval" before, so he doubted anyone in Toronto had even noticed the woman had disappeared. Alyce had stolen her life, and then her identity. Any morality Alyce had possessed as a mortal had been jettisoned as soon as she'd crossed over.

Natalie shook her head, remembering Richard, remembering Janette's comment about the rare mortal being able to become immortal. She doubted she had what it took, either. She looked at Nick with a renewed respect, and leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked, surprised.

"For being you. For being one of the rare ones."

* * *

The funeral for Edmund Blaylock was a tribute to his life as a journalist, heavily peopled by friends and associates from his life before the *National Intruder*. Natalie and Nick had gone to the viewing the night before, and Natalie had agreed to attend the funeral services on Nick's behalf. The eulogy, presented by one

of Canada's leading telejournalists, would have made Blaylock proud; apparently his professional associates preferred to remember the man he'd been, rather than the lost soul he had become.

At the station, Schanke delivered his report to Stonetree, much to the Captain's displeasure. No clues relating to the identity of the murderer had been found at the scene; the perpetrator had been unusually careful to leave no evidence whatsoever. Natalie's coroner's report was no help either; the knife wound was clean, bloodloss rapid and voluminous, nothing special to identify the blade. Examination of Blaylock's effects indicated that he'd had no wallet, which pointed to a robbery, but little else could be learned. Although the investigation continued for a few more days, finally even Stonetree had to agree that it would remain unsolved. The crime was catalogued as robbery and murder by person or persons unknown. The admission put him in a bad mood for more than a week.

* * *

After the funeral, Natalie had returned to Nick's apartment, and finally told Nick about the visitation of the Enforcers. The news cheered him, much to her surprise. He explained to her that the fact that they had acknowledged her and still turned away was a good sign; they didn't see her knowledge of vampires as a threat to the species as a whole. By the time she had arrived, Nick had already called the museum about the Mayan cup, promising that if they would loan the cup to him for a short period, he would return it with a companion cup that had somehow found its way to him. He had refused to explain the origin of the second cup, but the new curator was curious — and excited — enough to agree. Feeling better than she had for days, Natalie went to the museum to pick up the cup before closing time, returning to Nick's apartment shortly before sundown.

That evening, Natalie and Nick visited Janette at the Raven to let her know what had really happened. It was hours before the club would open for the night and they could talk privately. The murder on her doorstep had not hurt business, although she voiced complaints at the type of clientele the notoriety had attracted to the place in recent nights.

Janette was clearly relieved, although not surprised, to hear that the Enforcers had gone away satisfied. When Natalie brought out the two Mayan cups from her bag and placed them on the bar, Janette had gone silent, staring at the cups for a long time before speaking.

"So. They exist," she said at last, her voice barely above a whisper.

"They exist," Nick repeated, nodding solemnly.

"And this ceremony — this ritual to regain your mortality — you will do it?" Her voice was flat, but Natalie thought she could detect a tremor of sadness behind the words. Once again she was struck by the great age of these two, and the many years they had spent together.

Nick had no answer to the question. It was a question he had asked himself again and again since they had first discovered that Alyce's cup was genuine.

"The ritual requires human blood to be effective," Natalie explained quietly. "Not the blood of a sacrificed victim, I hope," she added with a smile.

"No?" Janette asked.

"No," Natalie replied. "I've told Nick I'll be happy to play donor. All he has to tell me is when he wants to try it."

Janette listened to this in silence, but there was a farewell in her dark eyes, almost mourning, when she turned back to Nick.

"I've waited so long ..." he whispered finally. He leaned his mouth against his fist, arm propped against the bar. His brows furrowed and he shook his head. Janette drew a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. Natalie could have sworn that her eyes glittered with tears.

* * *

Review of Alyce's notes had revealed the location of the hitherto unknown Classic Maya city. The emblem glyph of the city was still unreadable, and if rediscovered by mortal archaeologists, would probably provide them with years of controversy until a definitive name could be agreed upon. The notes also indicated that the prize find of the dig — the cache of Mayan bark-paper books — was safely shut away, back in the stone sarcophagus that had kept them safe for centuries. Nick's mouth watered at the idea — to date, only four Mayan books were known to exist, the vast majority of them having been destroyed by the Spaniards in their conquest of Central America. Their philosophy had been simple and effective — destroy a people's culture, and you destroy a people.

She had written, too, of her usage of her dig crew, of how she'd convinced them of her godhood, of how she'd played out snippets of Mayan mythology to feed off them, leaving only the crew chief — a special favorite from previous digs — still alive, his mind clouded and confused. Those future archaeologists would find yet another mystery in that lost city when they came upon the skeletons of that native crew.

As he read the notes, the picture of what Alyce had become grew clearer. Convinced that Nick had deliberately refused her immortality, her hatred for him had grown daily, fueling her determination to find another sacrificial cup to lure him to his destruction. She had even written that she might have allowed him to carry out the ceremony, and then killed him once he became mortal again.

She'd started sending the facsimile cups as a tease, a way of calling him out. She had decided to deliver the last — the sixth — in person. That was the last entry in her journal. He could guess from there what had happened. She had shadowed him, for who knows how many days, and had followed him to his rendezvous with Blaylock. He hadn't sensed her presence any more than any of the other vampires at the Raven had — she had blended into that crowd, just one more of their kind. Killing Blaylock had most likely been her way of calling him out. Killing Natalie would have been punishment, and making her a vampire an even greater torture. He felt cold at the thought that he might have had to destroy Natalie; he hadn't realized just how much he'd come to depend on her until he came so close to losing her. And he had no doubt that had Alyce succeeded, the Enforcers had been prepared to destroy all three of them. They had been very lucky, indeed.

He shook his head. Nothing of Alyce, the woman he had known and loved, had survived, except in those last few moments before she'd died once more. The archaeologist, the scientist, had survived, but not the woman. He wondered just how much of the Crusader, the man, remained in him.

He glanced at the pair of jade cups, one retrieved from Alyce's sack, the other borrowed back from the museum, sitting side by side on his kitchen counter. Such a mundane backdrop to artifacts so arcane.

How much of the man remained after all these centuries? There was, he knew, only one way to find out.

Editor's Note: Pat Ritter's "Dear 'Licia" series began as letters to a friend. Installments I and III are presented here in basically their original form. Installments II, IV and V are told in narrative form. I enjoyed these walks on the weirdside of Philadelphia — my home turf lo, these many years ago — a lot. And I hope you will, too. Look for more adventures of our intrepid heroes in next issue.

by Patricia A. Ritter

City Driving Is Hell

Dear 'Licia,

Well, nothing new has been happening here lately, other than my losing my car. Yeah, I lost my car. No, it wasn't repossessed (had a *real* good exorcism last time), it kinda, ah, sank into Chestnut Street. It's a long, complicated and weird story. Yeah, I know, you can't resist a good story. Okay, make yourself comfortable, here goes.

One of our local news stations had a news story the other day about finding human skulls in Fairmount Park (The Art Museum and the Philadelphia Zoo are kinda in the park). Now, I knew there was something about this, 'cause at the beginning of the news they give captions of what's in the news. Usually it's murders and robberies with the big story on Action News being a fire (9 out of 10 times it's in the Kensington section. That neighborhood should be becoming nicely new and shiny with all the new buildings that are going up because of all the fires).

Well, this time the big story was about the skulls. They think it has to do with this cult that has just moved into the area (I don't recall their name). The members deny it, even though they are related to another cult that does perform human sacrifices. So of course these people, who are probably only guilty of dancing naked in Fairmount Park, are now being branded as Satanists.

Since I only watch the news for the weather, I basically ignored this. It doesn't concern me. Was *I* wrong. Last night, I went to mail a letter downtown (next or second day for 25 cents rather than $8.75) and was on my way out along Chestnut Street when I felt the road tremble. I thought, great, there's been another accident in the subway (once in a while, a trolley conductor will decide to race the El and end up jumping the tracks).

Imagine my surprise when one of the manhole covers exploded upwards, then another, and another. I leapt from Sir Percy, my car, since I could make better time on foot (besides, no insurance, if anything happened, and I'd be screwed). This was good, because the road under Percy opened up and swallowed him (this in and of itself is not unusual. The roads here are so bad, I *just* missed losing Corwaine to a sink hole a few years ago.).

I wished I had my bow, because it sounded as though there was something *big* under the street wanting out. And it wanted out *NOW*! The street fairly exploded with the force of its emergence. I did what any brave soul would do in such a situation — dove for the nearest doorway and prayed it wouldn't see me. And thought thoughts of being a scrap of paper on a filthy Philly street.

It was big, it was ugly, and I think it was hungry. It had big fiery-red eyes and a long snout. Ridges ran from its nose up its head and down its neck. Its maw gaped showing glowing white teeth and I thought of all the toothpaste commercials it could do. Smoke curled from its nostrils and saliva dripped, sizzling on the street.

It saw a street person warming himself on a steam vent and lunched. I took the opportunity of its being distracted and bolted from my cover and around the corner. I knew there was a church nearby, and that meant holy water. It's supposed to be good for this sort of thing.

Not expecting the church to be open, I made straight for the pastor's home. The door was opened by an elderly woman, who nearly slammed the door in my face when I made my request. Then a breeze of brimstone wafted past and I pushed into the house. The pastor looked at me in surprise for invading his home, but he must have been one of the *very* few holy men in the city because he seemed to believe my story and gave me the water. I thanked him, he gave me his blessing, and I bolted.

The 'whatever' was making its way along Chestnut Street, noshing on sleeping ventmen. I managed to get ahead of it — it didn't move too quickly — and made my way to Jefferson University Hospital. Luck was with me; seemed there was a gang war and an ambulance for the wounded. And the ambulance was unattended. I did a quick double-check and jumped inside. I grabbed a fistful of gloves and tubing and a few scalpels. I did a quick scan to see if there was anything else, then left.

Now, I could say that I defeated this beast single-handedly, but that wouldn't be right. Besides, I'm not the virtuous hero of a horror story. No, in my hurry to get back to the 'whatever' I ran past a street gang. A lone girl running through the city seemed to be a good target for them so they put up a chase.

They would have caught me if it weren't for the creature. Stopped them in their tracks. I suggested they do something before it decided they'd be tastier than ventmen. Well, a few of the younger ones (I'd say the gang had about 10 guys and 3 girls) tried to prove their mettle and attacked. They didn't stand a chance, but I took advantage of their distracting it to rig up a rough sling with the tubing.

I filled one of the rubber gloves with holy water (Holy Water balloons, Batman!), loaded the sling and let fly. Fortunately for me this thing gave me ample target, otherwise I would have missed. The spot the balloon hit hissed and bubbled.

I heard a siren rapidly approaching. Ah, Philly's phinest has arrived. The gang leader saw what was happening, other than that his more energetic were being munched. He had a few of his boys open up a fire hydrant — as far as he knew, I was shooting water balloons.

The cops arrived as I was letting loose with a scalpel. I think they would've taken me in if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes. Eyewitness News shouldn't be far behind; they're only a few blocks away and all this commotion should draw out a news team.

One cop started shooting at it, the other called for backup, and the gang leader managed to open the hydrant. The creature bellowed, shattering several windows in the area. I was tempted to leave this in the hands of the law and lawless, but I wanted to see this through to the end. Besides I still had stolen hospital supplies left.

Under normal circumstances, I don't think the scalpels and bullets would have hurt it, never do in the movies. But we were getting it from all sides and I think the ventmen didn't sit too well in its belly. Under this pounding, it began to dissolve, or go away, I'm not really sure. We eventually won and by the time the news crew and reinforcements arrived, all that was left was a cloud of sulphur.

I noticed the remaining gang members slinking off into the shadows and was about to follow suit, when I noticed my way blocked by a very large blue chest. I was half tempted to pull out my Katarina Rikkert ID (that's my bounty hunter role-playing character, see last letter), but decided I'd get into mondo trouble for impersonating a cop. I just looked at him and smiled.

He took me aside and questioned me, I told him my rights (I have the right to remain silent, anything I say will probably get me into a lot of trouble). He brought up charges, I studied my fingernails. He wanted to take me in, I told him he had no proof. Neither would give any quarter. I was glad Goode was mayor and not Rizzo (Rizzo's time was noted for police brutality, even though he used in his campaign that he received no reports of brutality. Think about it). I dug in my pocket and pulled out $15. He thought it was a feeble bribe, and I told him it was to pay for the ticket I was going to get for parking illegally *under* Chestnut Street. He finally realized that he wasn't going to get anywhere and let me go.

Well, Sir Percy was parked under Chestnut Street, so I could either walk or risk public transit. There are some times when I think it would be safer to face that *monstrosity* than what rode the subway at night. 'S'okay, it was still early enough (just before midnight), I *just* managed to catch the last train home.

Geeze, after that, anything else to say would be a let down. So I'm not even going to try. I'll just sign out and wait until the next letter to tell you about this really cool story I just finished.

I remain,

Your humble servant,

Floyd.

Just When I Thought ...

The laughter accompanying Carson's monologue was the only sound in the lounge. The new term started the second day after New Year's. Suspicion was that it was Administration's idea of a joke, so soon after the holiday? People were still suffering from party burn-out. The post-vacation zombies were not a pretty sight.

Like the previous term, I expected to spend most of the late hours down in the Dungeon (TV lounge in the basement. The button on the lift was marked "D" because it used to be the dining hall.) watching late night TV. You'd be surprised, some of this 'after prime-time' stuff is better than the mainstream. That's how I've met most of the people I know.

Anyway, I was in the Dungeon watching old *Mission Impossible* re-runs (real old ones, without Peter Graves), when I heard someone come down. Took a glance over, wasn't expecting much; I've learned that the only ones up at this hour are the geeks, dweebs, drunks, and insomniacs. Too many of the former, not enough of the last. And I forgot to bring down my "Geek BeGone."

As he crossed to where I was sprawled, I saw that I needn't have worried too much. He moved like a dancer, which pretty much eliminated geek or drunk (I've known some dancers who were dweebs). Guesstimated his height to be about six feet, a little taller than me, and built a little stockier than a dancer, more like martial artists I know. His dark hair and eyes accentuated his classical looks but were anachronistic with his tattered jeans and "Just Do It" tee shirt. That notwithstanding, I decided that he was someone I'd like to get to know better.

He sat in the chair at my feet, while I remained sprawled across the couch. Hey, not many people come down after Carson's monologue, so usually I have the lounge to myself. Those that do journey down sit way in the back in the dark. They aren't planning on watching the late-lates.

"Oh, *Mission Impossible*," he commented. He spoke with a slight accent but I couldn't quite place it. "I like the newer ones better."

"Me too," I agreed. "You new here?"

He nodded. "Just transferred in. I would've chosen Temple, but they were on strike last semester." He smiled. "By the way, I'm Chris."

"Floyd."

He looked very puzzled. "That's an odd name."

"Well, it's just a nickname. My real name is much harder to remember." I winked. "Besides, how many girls do you know named 'Floyd'?"

"Point," he chuckled. "So, what are you doing up so late? Don't you have classes tomorrow?"

"Eight in the a.m." I sat up on the couch so I could see him better. "What are you in for?"

"Probably life unless I can get an early parole," he replied so deadpan I started laughing.

"You're not a local, are you?" I finally asked.

"I'm not from Philadelphia, if that's what you mean."

"You have an accent. European, isn't it? It's not much," I added, "but enough."

"British, actually. I've travelled so much I thought it was just about lost." He smiled. "Least Ah don' 'ave a Cockney accent. Too 'ard on the ears."

We talked until about 6 when he excused himself to go up and get some sleep. The early-early news was on — how in the world can they be so awake at this hour? I'm not that awake even when I've had a whole day to practice.

I didn't see him again for a few nights. Actually managed to get some sleep in that time. Come on, college students are notorious for staying up to all hours and still making their 8 o'clock lectures. It's not that hard as long as you don't think about staying awake. Writing is a sure way for me to see the sun rise.

Since it was Wednesday, it was *Adderly*. Okay, so I like hokey spy shows. He did too, so I'm not alone in the world.

"You don't look so good," I commented as he walked in. He was kind of sallow looking, like he'd eaten something that had disagreed vehemently with him. Caff food will do that to you.

"Haven't been eating right," he said, sitting beside me.

"Yeah, the food here's pretty lousy," I agreed. "You're not a frosh, can't you get off the meal plan?"

"Not on it. I have an, ah, unusual diet."

I was going to make a comment about the grazing not being so good around here (yes, I tend to be a little cruel to vegetarians) but Sparks, Psi, and their current girlfriends came in giggling (read "pickled"). I knew what was coming next, and did not want to be around. Those loud sucking sounds get to be annoying after a while.

"I'm going to go read," I said standing. "No reflection on you, Chris." I indicated the nuzzling quartet, "They just get on my nerves when they're like that."

"I see," he said with a look of distaste. "By the way, are you doing anything Friday night?"

"Well, I have training until about 8, but after that ..." I shrugged. "Why?"

"You dance?"

Not well, but I like to. "Some."

"You want to hit the Troc tomorrow night?"

There is a god. "Sure," I replied noncommittally. "Meet in the lobby at, say, 9 o'clock?"

"Sounds good to me."

"See ya." I waited until I was half-way up to my room before thanking all the gods I could think of and some made up for the moment. Even tried to tell myself that it might not be any more than when Usagi and I would go out when he was between girlfriends. I was also very good at ignoring myself.

* * *

I suffered my way through classes and practice. After re-humanizing myself, I met Chris in the lobby. I dressed well enough, something very comfortable that went with sneaks and looked good. When I saw Chris, I felt way outclassed. It's not that he was dressed that much better than I was, it was just the way he held himself. If Oberon were in civvies, he'd look like you or me, but you could still tell. My brother would do that, dress like a bum and carry himself like a prince.

"I assume you know where the Trocadero is?" he asked, holding the door open for me.

"You don't?"

"No. My RA suggested it."

"Oh. It's in Chinatown. Right next to the Arch."

"Is it far? My car is parked around the corner."

"Not really. We can walk if you don't mind the cold. Otherwise the El is a buck-fifty. Driving is a bad idea, parking down there on a Friday night is a bitch."

He shrugged, snapping his coat. "Cold doesn't bother me much. Lead on, MacDuff."

"By the pricking in my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," I replied, leading the way out of the dorm. It wasn't long before I regretted my suggestion. It was colder than a ... well, you know. My leather jacket didn't help much, but my ego decided if he could handle the cold, so could I. That should have been a clue, because he didn't look like a were-penguin (assuming there is such a thing and I'd recognize it).

"Shakespeare fan?" he asked while we cut through the alleys toward 30th Street.

"Not really. Not by choice." We carefully walked across a patch of ice. "I've got this friend, she's usually the one I'm writing to when you come down. N-E-Way, she's a beaucoup Shakespeare fan and I have to read all that stuff just so I can understand what she's talking about."

Our feet crunched through the frozen slush. The snow had stopped falling, it left enough of a dusting to make the ice patches extra slick. There were some parts that weren't frozen, chalk that up to the peculiar weather patterns that inhabit the city.

When we arrived at the Troc, he gallantly paid the cover. Felt much better inside; it was warm and the music was loud. Dancing was good, he was incredible. Figured he had to be a dancer. He moved like he had been practicing this routine for years. Yeah, I train and all but I still have trouble with simple things like walking, forget dancing. (Though one guy at Master Camp decided to teach me to dance like a Latino, "You

dance too much like an American, you have to use your *heeps* more.") He just drew me into synch with him and you'd think I had coordination.

We danced until two, when the bar closed. All hot and sweaty, I wasn't looking forward to the colder walk home (it felt like 5 below). He had his arm around me, he didn't seem to notice. I was content, and, of course, the gods heard that and said, "Can't let that continue!"

As we passed under Reading Terminal, one of the shadows moved. 'Maybe it's just a bum and he'll go away,' I hoped. They're like animals, if you don't infringe on their turf, they won't bother you. There was a brief flicker from whatever it was he had in his hand, and it could only mean trouble for us.

He blocked our way, forcing us to stop where we were and start backing up. Chris took his arm from around me, and nudged me behind him. Then we heard someone come up behind us. Before I could react, I was grabbed, my arms pinned behind me. The sound of a gun being cocked stifled my idea of struggling. Just once I'd like to go out on a *normal* date.

I think the muggers were just as surprised as I was when Chris lunged for the guy with the gun. I heard the shot, which triggered my reaction. Left heel into shin, driving down to instep. He loosed his grip. Step to the side in a low, wide stance, drive elbow into chest. He let go. Pull right foot in, shift, lash out (left foot) side kick to his chest, adjust stance, roundhouse to the side of his head. He fell. Foot came down, turning/launching me toward Chris.

Chris was kneeling over the mugger, one hand to his gut. The mugger's head was twisted just a little wrongly, broken neck most likely. My rush started fading and my knees started shaking. Then the cold hit again, and I barely managed to resist the urge to drop into the slush.

When Chris pulled aside his hand, it was darkly wet. Blood. He'd caught the shot. "We've got to get you to the hospital," I said, resting my hand on his shoulder. "Jefferson's close."

"No. No hospital." He looked at the blood on his hand then wiped it on the downed mugger. "No."

"What are you talking about?" I yelled, hysteria starting to creep in. "You were *shot*, for cryin' out loud!"

"I am *not* going to the hospital," he hissed. "I'll be fine." He looked to the still form with a look that was almost hunger.

"Fine, we'll just walk back to the dorm while you *bleed* to death." Then I noticed that expected flow of blood wasn't happening.

"Unlikely," he said flatly with just a trace of humor.

"Why?" He was about to answer, I interrupted him. "Wait, let me guess, you're dead already. Yeah, right, I've been watching the late-lates with an undead. What are you pledging, Skull?" He looked up at me and smiled. A big *toothy* grin. "Cute fangs, Chris. Next you're going to tell me you're a vampire, right?"

He slowly stood, rested his hands on my shoulders, and looked me in the eye. I blinked, he was gone. My eyes were used to the dark, but he wasn't there. System shock. Time to meet the sidewalk. Hi.

He caught me just before I hit, picked me up, and carried me the two blocks to Market East station. And my only thought was, 'Neat, he can carry me.'

He put me down on one of the benches, said he'd be right back, and ducked out. I must've dropped off, 'cause the next thing I knew was the smell of coffee.

"How are you doing?" he asked, wrapping my hands around the steaming cup.

"Thanks. Fine, I think." I took a sip, surprised at how calm I was, all things considered. "Well, this explains lots of things," I finally said.

"Oh? Such as?"

"Clue 1: Your weird diet. You're definitely not a veggie."

He laughed hesitantly. "I should say not."

"Clue 2: Why you're not cold while I'm freezing. Unless I was wrong and you really are a were-penguin."

"A were-penguin?" He shrugged. "Why not."

I took another swallow of the coffee. "Now what?"

"I think it's time we headed back. Don't know about you, but I've had my fill for the evening."

That screamed double entendre. "Yeah, I bet. Is this the scene where the hero fades into the mist?"

He looked a little puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Aren't you afraid I might tell your deep, dark secret and then you'll be besieged by vampire killers?"

He shook his head. "Not really. C'mon, it's the '90s. New Age, past-life regression, Rama, crystallography. There's more than enough other weird stuff to keep the fundamentalists occupied." He smiled. "I've read your stuff in *Maya*. Not bad for a school literary journal at that. They'd just think this is another product of your overactive imagination." He chuckled. "Demons in Chestnut Street. Really, now."

His expression changed to serious. "Besides, you're supposed to be afraid of me," he said.

I regarded him over the rim of the cup. "You haven't given me a good reason."

He showed me the scar which was the bullet wound. "What about what I am?"

"Nope. I wasn't afraid of you before, you've only since proved to me I can trust you." I finished off the last of the coffee. Hope I sounded more nonchalant than I felt. "My fainting, no I do not do that often, would have been a perfect opportunity for you to have a three-course dinner."

I looked up; he had his hand extended. Taking it, he pulled me to my feet. I staggered some, I was still a little shaky from what happened. "Does this mean you'll take me dancing again?" I ventured with a (lame) smile. He pulled me into a tight embrace. "Figures, out of all the guys here, I get caught up with Count Chris-tula," I told his shoulder.

"And I get a paranomaniac." He clasped my left wrist and brought it around to his face. My watch, not vein! "It's getting early, we ought to be heading back."

"Just when I thought ..." I began as we stepped onto the subway. He looked at me questioningly. I shook my head.

As the song goes, some things are better left unsaid.

Life's A Beach

Dear 'Licia,

Just thought I'd drop you a line from the sunny *beach* (I've been told I say it in italics). I don't know what the weather's like where you are, but here it's sunny and quite on the warm side. Things would be better if the air conditioner worked regularly, but sometimes there are sacrifices to be made.

Y'know, I thought I'd come down here, take some time to unwind, and forget all the strange things that go on at home. Did I tell you we think our house is haunted? Things that the cats didn't do or that happened before they moved in (with their kitty luggage and all). I'll tell you about it in my next letter.

N-E-Way, I guess I ought to brag to you about my being here while you're stuck there. One of the popular things here is hunting for pirate treasure. I don't put much stock in it, it just seems too contrived for tourism to be *really* authentic. I did pick up some brochures for you, you being into pirate stuff et Al (what Al has to do with it and why he's et, I'll never know). Course, since these are "pirate waters" there are all sorts of legends of who's been here and buried what. I even heard that it's suspected Laffite may have visited here, though no one's really sure.

I really lucked out with the hotel. I was supposed to be sharing it with a chick from an Ivy League school, but something happened and she had to cancel. And since it was so last minute, they haven't yet found me a roomie. This might change tomorrow, I can never guess.

Before she shows, though, I ought to tell you about my room. I got a beach-side view with a balcony. The hotel is on a hill and the drop outside is something fierce. I'm only on the fourth floor, but that would indeed be a nasty spill. A path from the hotel winds its way down to the beach. Unlike the beaches home (or at least the ones I go to), there are palm trees fairly close to the waterline. Very handy for someone, like me, who's trying to maintain a cave-dweller glow. Yes, I remembered my SPF Carlsbad Caverns; I don't want to come home looking like something out of a post-holocaust flick.

There are shops in town, over-priced and too touristy. I've done more browsing than real shopping (though what's making its way down to the beach right now would be a nice addition to my house, ne?). Maybe I'll rent a moped and check out the not-so-touristy places. You never know what you'll find if you know where to look.

I'm going to close this now, take it up tomorrow.

It's tomorrow.

Well, so much for my luck of having the place to myself, they just assigned me a roomie. According to her tags, she's from University of Miami, but she doesn't look like what I'd expect from a Floridian. She's not here right now, just dumped off her luggage and disappeared. As long as she doesn't snore, everything should be fine.

I just thought I'd put that in for now. I'm going to go comb beaches, who knows what I'll find — doubloons, pieces-of-eight, broken shells, sugar daddy. All right, forget the last comment, I was just checking to see if you were paying attention. Ta!

I'm ba-ack.

Didn't get in until real late last night, went down to the bar to tourist watch. If I weren't so Nordic-looking, nobody'd notice me and I could watch uninterrupted. Unfortunately, I was interrupted. Yeah, some geek tried to pick me up. Why do all the geeks hunt *me* out, do I have a sign? I don't know. I just turned on my

"charm", gave him an icy stare and a good case of frostbite. My roomie back home suggested I should write a book on how to get *rid* of guys. Go figure.

When I got in, Carol wasn't. That's her name, Carol Lajuenesse. There's something strange about her — I'm the one to speak, I know. I was dropping off to sleep when I heard a sound on the balcony. The doors were open to let in the cool breeze. A shadow crossed the door; it was female and about the right size for Carol. She didn't turn on any lights, but I heard her rummage about and crawl into bed. I relaxed a bit and went back to sleep.

At the nice leisurely hour of 9 a.m., I rolled out of bed. Carol was gone already. Now, I can usually get by on 5 hours of sleep, less if I have to. This is vacation, there's no reason to have to (I'd sleep later, but the sun comes right in my window and in my face). As long as she doesn't bother me, I can handle it.

Today's been a little overcast, hard to believe the weather here'd be less than perfect. Haven't seen Carol much, probably in-town shopping. I'm not sure what else I'm going to do today, but I'm going to go think of something. Later.

It's later, much — days later.

Carol's been keeping the same weird hours. If I didn't see her luggage here, I wouldn't think there was anyone here. I committed the traveler's sin, I checked out her side of the room. What I *didn't* find piqued my curiosity. Her bags were empty (her steamer chest was locked, so that wasn't opened), as was the dresser and closet. How can she expect to spend a month in tropical luxury without hardly *anything*? There weren't even hairs on her pillow. I don't think *anyone's* that fastidious.

I went to bed real early and psyched myself to get up when I heard her come in. When she came in, I was awake. She still didn't use the door. I wondered why. These and other questions were to be answered soon.

I waited, slowed my breathing so she'd think I had gone to sleep. After about 20 minutes I saw her shadow slip to the window. I went out after her, I'd follow her down if I had to. Earlier I'd scoped out the window to figure out how to climb down. When I got to the window she was standing at the head of the path to the beach. How'd she get there that quickly?

I climbed down as fast as I could, I'd gone to bed dressed so I'd just have to jump up. I almost lost her in the shadows along the shore. I was pretty sure she heard me following her, sounded to me like I was crashing through the brush.

I don't know how far along the coast I followed her. The brush thinned as we approached a cliff. It didn't disappear altogether, just enough so that if she checked behind her, she'd see me right off.

As the sun began to rise, she turned from following the face to a slight path which cut into it and upward. I would have missed it if I wasn't trying so hard to follow her. It was just barely wide enough for me to maneuver, but she was doing it with ease. She got ahead of me and I lost her. I hurried ahead, as best I could, to no avail.

The path ended on the top of the cliff (fortunately the vertical drop was only maybe four stories, nothing like "The Cliffs of Insanity" [cue dramatic music]). I looked around, but she was gone. It was grassy, no place she could have disappeared into. I looked around some, searched for footprints, and only found an old cigarette butt.

I checked the path for a hidden branch, cave, or anything. Nothing. She must really know the area. I'm no tracker, but she shouldn't have lost me that easily. I considered making my way back to the hotel, but the sun was shining full force. If I went out in that, I'd be fried before I got back. I considered taking a nap in the path, but pictured myself slipping and falling on the rocks. I saw some trees a few hundred feet away,

seemed like a good place to wait until later. After checking for nasty bugs, I made myself comfy and took a nap, staying awake enough to listen for someone approaching.

I woke a couple times but the people didn't see me, neither were they Carol, so I dropped off again. If it weren't for the shade, it would've been way too hot. As it was it was just hot. My stomach reminded me several times it hadn't eaten and wanted to be fed. I promised it something really good when we got back if it would just leave me alone. That seemed to satisfy it.

The shadows were getting long when I suddenly woke, couldn't say what triggered it, and there was Carol. She was about a quarter of the way from me to the cliff and looking at something on the ground. She walked back to the cliff, got her bearing and walked away in the direction we'd been going. I started to carefully follow her. As I got closer, it didn't look like she was walking, exactly, but measuring something by strides.

The brush started to get thicker as we moved along. Soon she stopped, stooped, checked the ground, stood, and continued in a direction just off what we were following. After another five minutes she repeated the process. You know what it reminded me of, all those pirate flicks where they're following a map, yeah, that. Finally, in the shade of a huge palm tree, she stopped and started looking around. She didn't see me, she was checking the ground.

I could tell she was getting frustrated. There was something there and she wasn't finding it. Carefully I crept a little closer. And just like in all those movies, the ground gave way beneath me. I didn't hurt myself, my natural lack of grace saw to that. Carol heard me because she came to the rim of the pit and looked down. It wasn't that deep, only about nine feet to the rim.

"Who's down there?" she called.

"It's me, your roommate."

"What — never mind." She squatted at the rim. "Tell me what it looks like down there."

"Why? Are you looking for buried treasure?" I half expected her to laugh. Buried treasure indeed.

"Yes, I am," she replied deathly serious. "Now, are there any passages branching off of the hole?"

I figured I may as well look while I was down there. Since it was getting dark outside, I was glad I had my flashlight. I didn't turn it on just yet, instead I ran my hands over the sides. I might feel something I'd otherwise overlook. I found a hole the size of my fist, and my arm went in to my elbow.

"Did you find it?"

"Yeah." I pulled my arm out and kicked the hole a little larger. "I'll be back in a minute." I turned on my flashlight and crawled into the passage. It wasn't very long, only about ten feet or so. It angled downward slightly. Made me wonder if it didn't continue on the other side of the hole, only upward.

It opened up to a slightly larger room, roughly six feet around. Against the right side wall was something rectangular protruding. I went closer and saw wooden slats. About two feet by four feet. Could be a sea chest, could be a small coffin. The last thought gave me the creeps, and I tried to dismiss it.

The dirt was fairly loose around it. I cleared away enough to reveal a corroded brass hinge. The sea chest idea seemed more likely. Okay, now what? You going to haul it all the way back to the hotel? No. We go back to the hotel and get my rent-a-car.

I crawled back, found out that the passage *did* continue on the other side. Rather than following it up, I climbed up the sides of the hole. After telling Carol about the find, we went back to the hotel. We didn't

follow the beach as before, but found the road and followed it back. It took longer, but I doubt I would have found my way otherwise.

To make a long letter not much longer, we got the chest into the car and back to the hotel room. One of the sheets was put on the floor and the chest was put on top of that. The only problem was the hasp holding it closed. I got the tire iron and managed to lever it off. I was nervous about opening it, but Carol insisted.

When I opened the lid, a really putrid stench filled the room. Yeah, like a dead body. The tatters of clothes as well as some sludge covered the top of the contents. I thought I was about to be sick. Carol was excited.

"Did you know we'd find this?"

She nodded. "I'd hoped I'd remembered correctly."

"What do you mean?"

When she turned to reply, I regretted I asked. "That's me." I ran into the bathroom and paid homage to the porcelain god. When I was sure there was nothing left to offer, I returned to the room. The balcony doors and all the windows were open. The sea breeze started to clear the putrescent smell from the room. I think I looked as bad as the body.

"I ought to explain since you helped me so much," she began while I flopped onto the bed with a groan. "About two hundred years ago, there was a privateer named Jacques Lajuenesse. I was his, ah, mistress. He called me his 'Treasure'. In 1789, the Bastille fell. Lajuenesse and his crew were ransacking the Spanish and English in the West Indies. He was about to head back to Montluçon, when he found about the Bastille. He had many enemies there, and now they were free. He could not return to France." She walked to the window and looked out.

"He also realized he could not remain long in the Islands," she continued. "His treasure was not as great as Laffite's or Blood's, but it was enough for them to kill for. He divided it among his men, keeping the two largest chests for himself. The ship was sunk off what is known as St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Lajuenesse, myself, and our chests were loaded into a dinghy rowed by two Cajuns.

"I'm not going to tell you all the details of our flight. After wandering from island to island, we came here. He had the Cajuns dig an angular path into the ground. As they dug he took me into the bushes, and as he had me explained that he was burying all his treasures here. Someday he'd be back, but this way he'd know his 'Little Treasure' was safe. It didn't console me any when I found out that Louis Capet died the same day."

"Let me guess," I began, "you spent the past two hundred years searching for the chest so you could be given a proper Christian burial."

She nodded. "Close enough. I began searching shortly after the end of the second World War. I can't tell you why I waited so long, it didn't seem as though any time had passed since my death." She turned from the balcony. "Bury me where you found the chest. The treasure is yours."

I buried the remains in the hole. The sun was rising when I climbed back out. I went back to the room, took an hour-long shower, decided it wasn't enough, and took another. I slept until mid-afternoon, then tried to decide what to do with the trunks. The scummy, putrid one (minus a few gems and some gold), was loaded into the car and taken to the authorities. There would be no way for me to smuggle it out of the country.

The other trunk, since it already had Carol's identification on it, would be sent to Florida. I figure I can get it there. I haven't opened it yet, though I ought to. My luck, the Cajuns are inside. I haven't been visited with any other ghosts, so maybe not.

After that, what more can I write about this vacation. Y'know, all the weird stuff that happens to me sounds like something out of one of Nick's books. And Chris, well, never mind.

I'll see you when I get home.

Regards to all.

Floyd

Earla Halgena Efen!

There is a saying that goes, "The gods love heroes. They also love a good laugh." I was beginning to think my life had turned into some great cosmic joke. With all the weird and strange things that have been happening to me lately, someone *must* be having a deitific laugh.

I could always look on the bright side, by this turn of logic, I must be a hero.

I thought that maybe after meeting Chris things would settle down a little. After all, he summed up quite a bit of paranormal all by himself. Why sure, Christopher Fontaine, gentleman vampire. Somehow it makes sense that I wouldn't hook up with a 'normal' guy. Karma. What was the crack Robin Williams made in *Dead Again* about a "Karmic Credit Card"? (Enough to make you think I was Alistair Crowley in a past life.)

At least things don't get boring. Strange? Yes, by the score, but never boring. Take, for example, the Halloween party Chris and I crashed.

Well, I suppose I should be glad that the full moon was over before the party, about a week before Halloween. Samhain for the pagans. Decided to take the easier route, rather than participate in rituals, go to a Halloween party with Chris. And he did *not* go as a vampire; we took the easy way out and wore our Renaissance Faire costumes. Besides, it would have been way tacky for Chris to do Vlad. (The *last* time I crashed a party, I met up with this guy who thought he was a vampire. I figured this time, if I brought my own weirdo, I would be safe.)

"There's a college out here?" Chris asked as he navigated the dark, country roads.

"Sure. What would you expect for a community college?" A deer peeked at us from the side of the road. "This is where the farmers send their kids to learn how to do better numbers."

"Somehow I can't see you at a 'hick' school. How did you keep from dying of boredom?"

I indicated a nearly hidden driveway. "Turn here. I found ways to amuse myself. That was how I met Tim and Lloyd. Tim told me about the party and invited me to crash it."

Chris followed the driveway until he came to the parking lot at Tyler Hall.

"How do I look?" Chris asked after we had locked the car. He was dressed in a black velveteen jacket with silver trim, black tights, and black shoes with big silver buckles. Sometimes I wondered if his costumes were actual period or recreations. I wore my cavalier costume since I'd just gotten my sword back from having a baldric made and wanted to show off the dragon-hilt.

"Not bad," I commented, trying to sound blasé. "I suppose it'll do." He grinned, showing fangs. "As long as you don't smile like that."

"Come on, it's Halloween. What would anyone say? 'Hey, man, great fangs. Who made them?'"

I smiled conspiratorially. "Oh? Who made them?"

He brought my hands to his lips and kissed the knuckles. "I don't think you really want to know," he replied in a near whisper.

And what did I reply? Nothing. I just stood there like an idiot. I'm a sucker for gallant.

"So," he began, still looking over my knuckles at me, "are we going to go in or stand out here?"

I shook my head. "Inside." He released my hand and led me into Tyler Hall.

The party was held in the old Tyler mansion. Buck U. (as the locals called it) and Tyler Park's lands were part of the Tyler estate. What is now the park was donated to the state and the house, guest house, and cottages were donated to the county for the community college. It was a warmish evening so the party had spilled out onto the surrounding patio and gardens. The trees were bare and the dried leaves crunched under our shoes, boots, hooves (one guy came as a satyr and his date was a nympho. Er, excuse me, nymph). They had even cleared out the fireplace in the solarium and had a fire going.

We found "the twins" soon enough. Lloyd still wasn't talking to me; guess he hasn't forgiven me for calling him an ass that day. How long ago was that? Tim, on the other hand, was glad to see us.

"Ah, so *this* is who you were writing me about." Haven't told *anyone* about Chris being a vampire, though. Who would believe me? Tim maintains that since there is a lack of purple rhinos there is a dearth of Magic. After years of my father pushing religion down my throat, I wasn't about to try to convince someone their beliefs were off.

Tim and Anne were dressed as the Sandman and his sister Death, based on characters out of the Neil Gaiman comic. Anne's costume was almost an exact duplicate of the one Death wore in the *Orpheus* issue. The only thing was that she was a touch on the short side.

"Lloyd still hates me, doesn't he?" I asked, sparing a glance to the crowded porch.

Tim shrugged. "Well, you know, what difference does it make?"

"Yeah, I know." I gave a quick glance around and saw 'Lex and his babe-of-the-week coming over. "I don't think I want to talk to 'Lex right now. You gonna be here a while?"

"At least until Lloyd leaves, he gave us a ride up."

"Okay. I'm going to show Chris the bridge then we'll be back."

"Don't I have a say in this," Chris protested.

I shrugged. "Sure. I'm going to the bridge. You can stay and meet 'Lex and his new chick if you want."

"Yes," Anne began evilly, "stay. I heard this one can get as far as polysyllabic communication."

"English major?" Chris asked her.

"Close enough," she said with a smile. "Does it show?"

"A little." I started walking off while they were talking. I heard him say, "I'd better catch up with her. Never know *what* trouble she'll get into next."

"Nice meeting you," she called after him.

"What's so interesting about this bridge?" he asked as he took my hand in his.

"Nothing much. Just a neat old bridge is all."

We picked our way down to the Neshaminy (I think it's a creek, but in some parts it sure looked like a river). He had extraordinary night-sight (I wonder why?), while mine was good, I also knew the way from when I was attending Bucks. Something to do rather than go to class. Spent a lot of time in the park — in the spring it was more interesting than class.

When we reached the creek, we followed the path that ran along side it. It was kind of eerie, with the waning moon shining dimly through the barren trees. Occasionally a breeze would sigh through the branches or a small animal would scurry by and I'd feel my hackles start for the sky. Overactive imagination? After all, it *was* Samhain, getting late, and if all those local ghost stories were true ...

"Why do I get the feeling this may have been a bad idea?" I muttered, glancing to Chris for reassurance. He just smiled. Either he figures he's the weirdest I'm going to get now, or he's looking forward to more. Gods save me from eager freaks.

"Schoefield Ford bridge was built in the mid 1800s, renovated in the 1970s," I began as we climbed the path to the bridge. The dim light of the moon wasn't enough to illuminate the interior and electric lights just aren't strung in parks. "The windows were added when they did work in the '70's. Not that they're doing any good now."

"I can see just fine," he said with a mischievous smile as we began to cross the bridge.

"Smart ass." I looked at him, the bridge, then back at him. "Okay, which is older, you or the bridge?"

"Why?" I'd not pressed him much about his past, but now and again I was curious as to how old he was. Not that *I* ever admitted to more than a vague range for mine.

"We're both older than you."

"C'mon, Chris, I don't often pry, but why won't you even tell me how old you are?"

He crossed his arms and looked at me. "What about you? What difference does it make?"

I wasn't going to tell him my superstitions, and I have enough of them. "I guess none." I tried a smile, because his tone had been a little too harsh. "Suppose you're over 21 by now?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Yes, I'm over 21. And I —" He was cut off by the sound of something crashing through the brush.

I didn't know *what* it was either, I assumed it was someone from the party, but it could have been a deer for all we knew. I just had a case of overactive imagination and drew my sword. Okay, I've been reading too many sword and sorcery stories of late. We stood side by side, Chris was facing the way we came, I faced the other.

"See anything yet?"

"Unh, unh," I mumbled. "You?"

"No."

Somehow I could tell it was about to be a weirdness, something *I* always want on a dark night.

"You stay here. I'm going to check —" My empty hand shot out and grabbed his arm. "What?"

"You're going no place. I'm not worried about whatever it is — I don't think the gods I'm entertaining are done with me yet."

"Then what?"

I shoved my nose against his, nearly knocking off my hat. "I don't want you to go trying to be chivalrous. *Now* is not the time for it!"

"If it's someone from the party, don't you think you're overreacting?"

"And if it's not?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw something move. I still had my nose up close to Chris, "Did you see something?" I muttered, barely audible.

Like something out of a comedy flick we both slowly turned back the way we came. Silhouetted in the opening was a horse and rider. "Tell me he has a head," I whispered.

"He has a head."

"Oh, good. I was worried we stepped into a Washington Irving story."

The horse and rider took a few steps into the bridge, making very reassuring clip-clop noises. The rider dismounted and walked toward us, the horse following behind. All I could tell in the shadows was that he was wearing an Indian costume. Wondered if he was going authentic, couldn't see enough detail (really any for that matter) to tell. They say it was the Lenape Indians that lived here, not that I'd be able to tell one from another by sight.

He said something, I don't know what it was, but it sounded terribly aggressive. Chris stepped forward, I let him, even going as far as stepping behind. He said something back, sounded like a similar dialect to what the Indian was speaking. There haven't been Indians in Lower Bucks for a *long* time. How old *is* Chris? Unless this whole thing is staged and they're really speaking, like Navajo or Zuni. I wouldn't know.

Well, the Indian wasn't happy with *whatever* it was Chris said. He went to his horse and mounted. Chris backed up into me. "How fast can you run?"

"Not very." I quickly glanced between him and the Indian. "What did you say?"

"Obviously not the right thing." He started nudging me toward the opposite end of the bridge. "Sheathe your sword. Slowly. Don't make any sudden moves."

I didn't argue, figured he a little better grasp of the situation than I did. I spared Chris a brief glance to see if I could see his expression and learn anything from that. There was a gleam to his eye that I didn't think could be attributed to the wan light seeping into the bridge. Looking back to the Indian, he wasn't giving off any of that 'supernatural aura' you see in movies and TV. Maybe that's what creeped me out, he looked so *normal.*

I kept my eyes on the Indian while we backed out of the bridge. He let us get about half-way then stood in his saddle and let out a piercing scream. The shriek went right through me, taking any nerve and resolve I

may have had with it. Chris must have noticed this because he picked me up and booked out of the covered bridge, the Indian right behind us. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Next thing I noticed, Chris had stopped and put me down. I opened my eyes; the Indian was just reaching the mouth of the bridge. I staggered backwards, then dropped my jaw. As the Indian reached the opening, he let out another shout and dissipated. When I found my speech again, everything came out in babble. "Whatdidhesay? Whatdid yousay? What is going on!"

Chris put his arm around my shoulders and kissed my cheek. "Try English this time."

"How can you be so calm!" I was still shaking.

"He was dead."

"So are you!" I exclaimed pulling away. "Shit. Here I am, what is it, midnight? Here I am, almost midnight on Halloween, arguing with a *dead man*! I *must* be out of my mind." I whirled to face him. "Then *why* did you run out of the bridge, huh? If he's so harmless."

"Well, he would have killed you if we'd stayed."

"Great," I started pacing. "We *did* get caught in the middle of a Washington Irving story."

"What? This is *not* New York and that Indian had a *head*." He grabbed my shoulders gently but firmly. "Look, you know how long it's been since Indians last lived here." I nodded. I didn't really, but I knew it had been a long before me. "I traveled with an ambassador to the various tribes in this region. I learned smatterings of the languages of this area, in addition to my French and German."

"Uh, huh, and William Penn was a friend of the family."

"Never met the man. Shall we go back to the party?"

"Ah, yeah, sure, ah." He led me toward the bridge. "Wait, no! What about Chief Scare-Me-to-Death?"

"C'mon, he's not going to bother us."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me."

We crossed the bridge, I was nervously looking about. There was no further incident as we made our way back to the party.

"I hope that was the only weird thing for this evening."

He smiled with a "I know something you do not" smile. This did nothing to reassure me.

* * *

When we arrived back at the party I was surprised to see that Tim and Anne were still there but no sign of Lloyd. "I thought Lloyd was taking y'all back."

Tim shrugged. "We decided against it. He left about an hour ago; mom wanted him home by midnight." He let slip a sarcastic grin. "The ties that bind and gag."

I tried not to snarf. "We'll give you a ride home."

"I knew you would," he said smugly.

I shook my head. Some people.

I didn't tell them about the incident down at the bridge. Anne, since she's a journalism major, would have wanted to check it out. I could see her walking up to the ghost and interviewing him. "Hi, I'm with the *Post* and I'd like to ask you a few questions." Tim would flat out refuse to believe in it. I kept my mouth shut.

The rest of the evening was pretty quiet; after that, small wonder. The party wound down and we took Tim and Anne back to their flat. Then Chris and I headed back to Drexel. I could have called in a favor and had us crash at Tim's, but I wanted a chance to quiz Chris about what happened.

"Okay, man — talk"

He smiled as he turned onto Route 13. "Once upon a time ..."

"You know what I mean. What happened tonight?"

"I'm not exactly sure. Really. Either one of two things happened. Either he really was a ghost and wouldn't have hurt you, though I didn't want to take the chance, or we were simultaneously in today and then."

"There were Indians when the bridge was built?"

He shrugged as well as he could while driving. "Could have been some other bridge same place, different time."

"But couldn't you tell if he was *real* or not?" I persisted.

"He was as real to me as he was to you." He spared me a glance. "Who do you think I am, Superman?"

"Well, you're real strong," I began ticking things off on my fingers, "and bullets don't bother you. Can you fly?"

He scowled as he took the exit for I-95. "Funny."

"Answer me something?"

"What?"

"Were things weird before you met me?"

He smiled. "You're asking *me* about weirdness? What can be worse than that?"

I placed my hand on his thigh and gave him a wicked grin. "Stick with me, dear. As the funny man in the booth says, 'You ain't seen nothin' yet!'"

Author's Note: Schoefield Ford Bridge was an actual covered bridge located in Tyler State Park, Newtown, PA. No, I never did see a ghost there, but I was never there at midnight on Halloween either. Shortly after Labor Day 1991, the bridge was destroyed by fire. An organization has been founded to raise funds to rebuild this historic landmark. If you would like more information, you may contact Dave Callahan, Schoefield Ford Bridge Fund, c/o 106 South State Street, Newtown, PA 18940.

It Was A Hoot And A Howl

There is an old Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." I am searching out Lee Fong, the name I assigned to the 'Chinese man' who cursed me. I prefer things to be interesting, it keeps things from getting too boring. However, there have been just too many 'interesting' things happening to me lately to count it to plain, stupid, luck.

What finally dismissed all doubt was Chris. Okay, so he liked to sleep in and took night classes. And I've known guys who have been much stronger than they looked. The strange eating habits didn't surprise me either, it's en vogue to eat weird. But I guess it was the Indian at Schoefield Ford Bridge that helped to drive it home. Yeah, of all the guys I hook up with a vampire.

I am not a fool, I'm not going to bemoan my luck and say, "It can't get any weirder than this." (Isn't this where Chippendales show up wielding cases of beer?) I am just going to sit back, relax, and see what else comes my way. Lon Chaney? I haven't seen an *Opera* in a long time.

"You talking to yourself again?" asked a familiar voice as I felt cool hands settle on my shoulders.

"I was talking to myself?" I asked as I turned to face my visitor. "Hey, isn't it a little early for you to be up?"

"I wanted to see the sun set," Chris said as he slid next to me on the couch. "I tend to sleep through them like you do sun rises."

"Oh, thank you." I clicked off the letter I was recording. "So did the colors show brightly through the carbon monoxide?"

He rubbed his chin and looked at me with a smile. "Well, there was a beauty in 1623 over Ponce de la Croix ..."

"1623? Now, waitaminute, how old are you?"

He just smiled, winked, and shrugged. "Come on, you know I'm not going to tell you."

"I'll find out. Just have to listen to you talk enough and I'll have it." I rubbed my chin with the tape recorder. "From what you've said, you're at least 380."

"I could be lying about Ponce de la Croix," he pointed out.

"True," I agreed, "but I think the Indian was a good clue. But that's something else altogether. Got any classes tonight?"

"What is today? Tuesday?" I nodded. "I *could* blow off my history class. You can't know how hard it is to not correct him when he gets something wrong."

I refrained from any comment. History wasn't my strong suit, I was glad enough to pass it because those who fail history are doomed to repeat it.

"So, why did you want to know?"

I took his cool hand in mine, not much warmer. "It's spring, supposed to be a clear night, I thought maybe a stroll down along the river."

"Aw, how romantic. We can gaze lovingly as the sludge flowes languidly by." I moved to slap him, he caught my hand and pulled me across his lap. "Sounds like fun," he whispered as he bent to kiss me.

* * *

We waited until well after dark before heading up 34th street. They say that it isn't safe to walk through Mantua at night. I wasn't worried, I'd been living in the city since my first semester and haven't had any problems. Guess it helped that I ignored the warnings about how dangerous it was. And that most muggers wouldn't hit a six-foot attitude.

We got a few strange looks as we sauntered toward the zoo. Nobody openly harassed us, Chris wasn't concerned and I tried to let that reassure me. Nevertheless, I was still edgy even though this was my idea.

"See, Mantua is no reason to be nervous," he said as we crossed the train bridge. "Didn't you face down a demon, two ghosts, several muggers, and a vampire?"

"I wouldn't say that I've 'faced down' a vampire."

"You haven't run away screaming."

I slipped my arm around his waist. "You haven't given me reason to. I guess I've read too many vampire stories. In all the stories, they've seemed so ... civilized."

We stopped outside the zoo. "And am I civilized?" His slight British accent made the question seem silly.

I smiled, placing my hand along his cheek. "More than the *last* guy I went out with."

With a leer, Chris took my hand, turned up my wrist, and kissed the vein.

"You're nervous."

"Sorry, sometimes I remember what you are."

"And?"

I glanced at him still holding my hand. "It frightens me." I glanced around, searching for the right words. "But I get the feeling I can trust you. Dag, I dunno. What can I say?"

He opened his mouth to answer when we were interrupted by a howl. It was caught up by the rest of the canines in the zoo.

"Wonder what got into them," I commented when it finally subsided.

"You want to find out?"

I gaped. "What? Zoo's closed."

"Come on." Still holding my hand, he dragged me along to the service entrance back along the train tracks.

"What if we get caught?"

"We won't." He deftly popped the lock on the gate and we both slipped inside.

Most of the animals were asleep as we stealthy crept past their cages. A few of the nocturnal hunters glared at us as we passed. It wasn't long until we reached where the wolves, coyotes, and other dogs were kept. They were nervously pacing back and forth in their cages, a low growl escaping their throats.

"I wonder what —" Chris's hand across my mouth cut me off. He glared at me to be quiet, I nodded. We listened, I couldn't see anything, but evidently he could. I watched as he seemed to be tracking something prowling through the shadows. I didn't know what it was, but decided that hiding behind Chris was probably a good idea. After all, you can't kill someone who's already dead.

Well, I guess it didn't matter to whatever was tracking us. With a roar, a shadow erupted from the darkness and hurled itself toward us. Chris shoved me aside, barely avoiding it's flailing limbs, and, as I could see, slavering muzzle, flung it into the pit with the other wolves. It landed with a yelp among its snarling compatriots.

"I wonder how it escaped," I whispered as I joined him at the rail. The rest of the animals were avoiding it as it glared up at us.

"I don't know," he replied absently. "Probably a local's idea of a joke, sneaking in and letting it out." He nodded, satisfied with his explanation. I wasn't, but decided I didn't want to argue with him. "Come on, let's go."

"But I thought — oh, never mind."

We left the zoo and headed back for the dorm. Chris knew something he wasn't telling me. Something about that wolf. I glanced at the sky. The stars winked back at me, the sky crystal clear and no full moon in sight. So much for the werewolf idea. I'd considered questioning Chris, but I doubted I'd get any sort of an answer.

As we neared Powelton, I glanced at my watch. Ah, where does the time go? "I think I'm going to get some sleep."

"What is it?"

"No, I thought the question would be something more like, 'What *was* it?'"

"What are you talking about?"

"The wolf. It wasn't a wolf, was it?"

His eyes grew distant. "I don't know."

"C'mon, it couldn't have been a *werewolf.* The moon is nowhere near full. Unless, being part of the myth yourself, you know something I don't know. Should I steal Si's air gun and load it with silver darts?" He looked confused then started laughing. "What? Is that something off like vampires are helpless during the day."

He shook his head. "No, the image of you stalking West Philly with a dart gun. How effective against a Normal is it? Not much more than enough to make someone mad. Shoot a werewolf and you're going to be little more than a smear when its done with you."

I stopped and turned. "Then it *was* a werewolf."

"I don't know. It didn't seem like one."

"Could it have been another of you?" Another legend was that vampires could change form. I thought it was a myth, but I used to think that Chris couldn't exist either.

He shook his head and started for the dorm. "No. I can no more change shape than you can." He held the door open and we went in and up the stairs. I lucked out with a single (read closet) on 10. We were silent as we climbed the stairs, Chris concentrating on something and me trying to figure it out.

"What do you think it was?" I asked as I put my key into the lock. Silence. "Chris, are you in there?"

He blinked and shook his head. "I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"Never mind." I pushed open the door as far as it would open. My room wasn't very big. I had to move the bed to open the closet or open the door. The desk wasn't very good, I couldn't pull back the chair. "I'll do some research in the then?"

"Yeah." Whatever it was was getting to him, usually he wasn't so distant. I was mildly confused when he turned and walked off without so much as a 'Good Night.'

He was probably going to go back to the Zoo. So was I. I shut my door and rummaged under my bed for my 'blades. I wasn't going to suggest he take me with him, he'd protest that it would be too dangerous and insist he'd have to protect me. Sometimes I wondered if he'd completely left the Eighteenth Century.

When I reached the gate we'd entered through before, it was almost 1 a.m. The lock was still open, and it screeched louder than I expected when I pushed. I tried to be quiet as I raced along the walkways to the wolf pit. I had no plan, no idea what I was going to do when I got there. Sure, maybe I should have stayed put, I was only going to bring weirdness upon myself coming out like this.

As I grew close, I slowed to a stop and walked along the grass, muffling the noise of my skates. I saw a human figure leaning over the rail, but wasn't close enough to hear anything. If it was Chris, I was taking a chance moving close enough to hear, he'd probably hear me first. As I watched, he slammed his fist on the rail, turned and stormed off. I waited until he turned the corner and hurried over to the pit.

One wolf glared balefully up at me. The rest of the pack ignored it, not even challenging it. "What are you?" I whispered. It growled in reply. "What — urp!" A heavy hand was clamped over my mouth while another arm pinned my arms to my sides. I was easily lifted off my feet and hauled off, my struggles ineffectual. I tried to open my mouth, if I could get off one loud, piercing, scream, maybe Chris would hear it. What I tasted when I bit was enough to make me gag. So much for that brilliant idea.

My captor was resistant to my skates kicking him in the legs as well. Great, I'm being carried off by Godzilla and there was nothing I could do except exhaust myself. We were still in the zoo, there were only so many places I could be hid. Unless ... The thought of being tossed into the new Carnivore Kingdom added strength to my struggles.

Come on, think. They weren't security, unless they've started putting the primates to work off hours. They had to have snuck in here as well. And it probably has something to do with that wolf that isn't a wolf and isn't a werewolf because the moon isn't full.

We passed to the other side of the gazelle fountain and I saw a gathering of people. I looked around frantically for Chris, but he was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't make out other than vague shapes at first, there wasn't much more than the available light. Made sense, wouldn't want to attract any undue attraction.

One broke apart from the crowd and approached us. My captor stopped and waited for the newcomer to stop. He stopped just out of flailing distance and regarded us. "So, what have you caught?" he asked in a deep voice, rich with a Caribbean accent. "Aren't you out past your bedtime, little girl?"

I replied with a struggle against my captor. Ineffectual, as expected.

"A live one, no?" He stepped around the gorilla so he could see me better without worrying about being kicked. "Zoo is closed, child. Why are you here?" I just glared. It was hard to talk with a mouthful of hand. "I will have him let you go. It doesn't matter if you scream, there is no one to hear you but the animals."

Didn't matter, as soon as the goon's hand cleared my mouth, I let loose a shriek that I'd swear could be heard all the way to Trenton. When I was finished, he just shook his head. "I told you it would be a waste of your breath. Now, why are you here?"

"I wanted a unique look at the animals?" The tightening grip told me I'd given a wrong answer. I was more concerned with stalling, giving Chris a chance to come save me. Just what he was worried about.

"I do not think so. Where is your friend?" I, for once, couldn't think of a smart comeback and wasn't about to give a straight answer. He nodded knowingly. "I see, your friend is here, is he not?"

I sure hope so, but strove to maintain a poker face.

"Good." He turned to address the surrounding pens. "I have the girl. If you don't come out, I will have her crushed." We waited. Nothing. Oh, Chris, I hope you're here. "I do not bluff. If you do not come out, she will die." Still nothing. "Fine." He turned back to me. "Kill her." Great, I wasn't looking forward to classes tomorrow, but Statics was preferable to this.

I expected Chris to show up, but was only rewarded with a crushing pressure on my ribs, squeezing the breath from my lungs. I was relieved when I began to regain consciousness. I guess he didn't actually plan on killing me after all. Or was it 'just yet'? Muscles were protesting my position, trussed in a heap out of the way of the group. At least the gag tasted better than that hand did. Moving as little as possible, I craned my neck to see if I could get a better view of what was going on. There looked to be about twenty people and, except for the two I'd already met, were standing in a circle droning a chant. The one who caught me was standing off to the side as though someone had removed his battery pack. The one I assumed was the leader, was in the center of the circle dancing an intricate pattern.

When everyone fell to their knees I noticed that the leader had changed his costume. A glowing death's face was painted on his and he was wearing a top hat. Looking like something out of the James Bond flick TBS ran a few weeks ago. Oh, no, he *was* supposed to be Baron Samedi. And the guy who'd caught me was a zombie. And if that wolf was involved in all this, then it was a loup garou. I'd found the local voodoo cult.

Why me?

"I thought you were going to bed early," whispered a voice behind me. I was barely able to suppress a scream. As it was, I think I levitated a few feet, further aggravating my position. "I didn't know you could scream so loudly," was nearly drowned out by the thudding of my heart.

"I should leave you here, in fact, I will until I get everything straightened out." He squeezed my shoulder. "Don't worry, even though you might make a good zombie, I won't let it happen. Don't go anywhere." Then he was gone.

You blood-sucking, undead bastard, get me out of this! Sure, I brought it upon myself, but weirdness is preternaturally attracted to me. Okay, being able to witness a voodoo ritual is a rare opportunity, I'd rather not be doing it like this!

I looked around for Chris, but that was like looking for a black cat in a power out. Where was zoo security, surely they don't condone this sort of thing. I tried to will myself invisible when I saw two people separate from the circle and approach me. Chit, chit, chit, chit, this was it, time for my part in this little ritual.

"I'm back," whispered the shadows. I heard a rustle and a low growl. "Bother. It's taking longer than I thought. Look, I'm going to let them take you and as soon as Lina is changed we'll be there." What? I didn't

want to know. I think when I get out of this, I'll transfer to someplace quiet. Someplace where the weirdness possibility quotient is considerably less. I was less then gently hauled up and into the circle. There was a strange, almost electrical, feel to the air. Towering over me, Samedi laughed a laugh that gave me a case of serious chills.

"So, child, now you see the rest of the ritual from a whole new perspective." His voice had taken on a new quality, deeper and older than it had been before. The circle started a new chant, swaying to the rhythm.

"Guede Nimbo. Guede Nimbo," droned the crowd.

"Guede Nimbo hear my plea," his voice was carried by the drone. "Guede Nimbo come to me. Guede Nimbo —"

"Stop this now, Bohbi," cut a voice through the chant. I couldn't see who it was, but figured it couldn't mean anything worse than what I was currently stuck with. The chanting stopped and I saw Samedi step around me, probably to confront the newcomer.

"I was being too generous trapping you in your wolf form, Lina." Oh, wonderful. I've been given a front row seat for a voodun fight. I should have stayed in bed. I should have stayed in bed.

"So who is the boy? Has being a loup garou changed your tastes?" He paused, bother I wish I could see what was going on. "He is not what he appears to be. Samedi says he is a Bocor, one far older than you or I." He grabbed my wrists by the chord tying them and hauled me to my feet to face Lina and Chris. The pain of near strappado kept any expression of recognition from my face.

Lina stood a little taller than Chris, his shirt barely long enough to be decent. Her black and grey hair hung in cornrows down to her waist and around her neck were strings of beads. She kind of reminded me of Iman, if Iman had claws.

My ankles were still bound, making it difficult for me to keep my balance. If I went to dead weight, he'd rip my arms out of their sockets. Maybe this is all a bad dream and I'll wake up soon. Not.

"I think your Loa will be angry, Bohbi. You promised it me in return for power." she took a few steps closer. "I am back, Bohbi, your Loa was cheated!" Her voice took on a new tone that added a new meaning to fear.

"No!" He cast me aside and stepped back. I fell to my knees. The circle of followers opened, allowing Lina to enter and preventing Bohbi from getting away. I was still closer than I would have liked but unable to do anything about it. "I can still give you her," he yelled as the sound of hooves approached. "Don't take this from me!"

Lina started to dance, blurring as she whirled faster and faster. The worshipers began a new chant which supported her and gave her dance more speed and magick. I grew dizzy watching so didn't see someone come close, pick me up and carry me off.

Even with the cords cut and the gag off I could barely move. Anything that could ache, ached. There was an icky taste in my mouth, though not as bad as the zombie's hand. I sagged against Chris, barely able to stand, and watched the spectacle unfold.

The circle had closed again, Lina and Bohbi enveloped in an unearthly green glow. I couldn't tell much what was happening, the circle obscured most of the view. The chanting rose in pitch, accompanied by the sound of horses and accented with a loud, inhuman scream. With that, the glow subsided, the chanting and dancing eased, and the zombie went up in smoke and stench.

The spell broken, the circle dissolved as each person went his and her separate way.

Finally all that was left were Lina and a burn mark. She shook her braids and approached us.

"Thank you, Chris. I am indebted to you for this."

"You should thank your Loa for giving us the idea to come investigate. If security had gotten hold of you, you'd be tossed in with the wolves or worse." He glanced around the zoo. "Will there be any more problems from his people?"

She shook her head. "No, si dye vle. He made them promises he could not keep and is now probably an ornament on Cali's necklace."

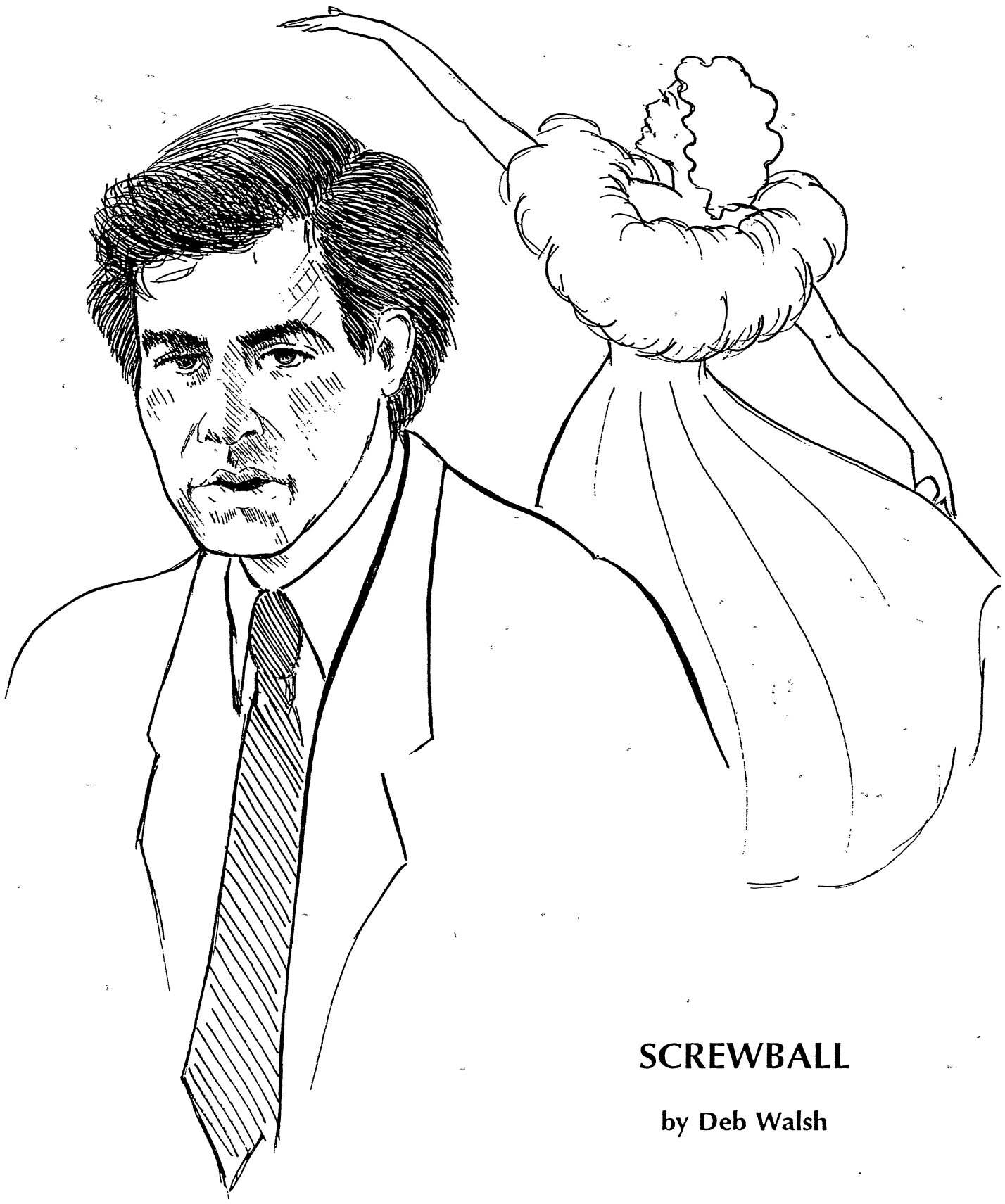
I wasn't sure of what she was talking about, but was really glad that she wasn't talking about me. "Hate to break this up," I began, "but it's getting early and I feel really gross right now."

She nodded, removed one of the strings of beads, and wrapped it about my and Chris's wrists. "I give you Aizan's blessing." She smiled and looked at me. "Aizan tells me you will need it."

"Thank you, I think." I said as she disappeared into the shadows. "Chris," I began turning my attention back to him. His black eyes seemed to be trying to draw me in. "You've got a better handle on this mystic stuff. Did she mean that things are only going to get worse?" My voice nearly cracked at the thought.

The smile of eager anticipation that crept across his face didn't help matters any. "With your luck," he bent and kissed my forehead, "it just might."

"Love you too."



SCREWBALL

by Deb Walsh

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Michael Burton laced his fingers behind his head, leaned back in his chair, and smiled benignly on the world around him. At the front of the room, an auctioneer lifted yet another piece of Hollywood memorabilia, asking for a starting price higher than his annual LAPD salary. The people around him were the cream of Hollywood society, here to bid on these treasures of film history in support of the United Hollywood AIDS Task Force, and every one of them was wearing clothing from exclusive shops he couldn't afford to walk into. But the woman at his side was Veronica Howles — smart, beautiful, successful, and although she had the pick of Hollywood, she had chosen to be with *him*. Life was a wonderful thing.

"Y'know, sweetie, y'could do a lot better," a sultry feminine voice said from behind him.

Burton jumped in his seat, twisting around to look at the woman who had spoken.

She was beautiful in the style of the '40s, with carefully crimped platinum blonde hair and a white satin sheath dress that left little to the imagination. She smiled her cupid's-bow smile and waggled her fingers at him. To one side of her sat a big studio executive and his overdressed wife, and on the other sat a darkly-intense Academy Award-winning screenwriter. None of them had noticed the blonde bombshell who'd popped into their midst, and his companion had given no sign of hearing the catty comment. He turned around in his seat again and closed his eyes in desperation. Then he turned back and opened his eyes once more. She was still there, smiling and waggling. He turned back to the front of the room and closed his eyes again.

"Michael, are you all right?" asked Veronica, an up and coming independent director of quality low-budget art films.

Sparkling brown eyes wide open now beneath thick dark brows, he goggled at her a moment before stammering, "Yeah, sure, just fine. I just ... I just need a little air," he added, nodding. His mind raced to find a palatable excuse to get him — and the ghost no one but he could see — out of the auction room. "Yeah, a little air will do me up right. I think I'll just step out for a minute, if that's okay," he finished awkwardly.

She glanced toward the auctioneer, then back at him. Her expression said she'd go with him, but he knew the lot she wanted to bid on was coming up. And he certainly didn't want her to listen to him talking to what appeared to be thin air.

"No, you stay here. You don't want to miss your piece. I'll ... I'll just take a short walk. Don't you worry," he assured, patting her on the arm, and darting nervous glances at the coquettish beauty sitting in the row behind them.

"Well, if you're sure ..." she offered doubtfully. "I mean, if you're not feeling well —"

"No!" He took a deep breath. "No. I'm fine. Just need a little fresh air. I'll be back before you know it."

She nodded in her sensitive way, her big dark eyes wide with concern behind her designer glasses. But her attention kept drifting back toward the auctioneer's podium, and he sketched a wave and slid apologetically past the other people in their row.

Out in the lobby of the auction house, he searched desperately for a private place to talk. He slipped into an alcove, and called out softly, "Okay, I'm alone. We can talk."

"Usually when I'm alone with a man, talkin's the last thing on my mind," cooed the blonde, materializing in front of him.

"Samantha Marlowe," he breathed. "What are you doing here? You've been dead for almost 50 years!"

"Don't remind me," she pouted. "Limbo is such a dreary place — not a decent night club in sight. And no champagne!" She looked around briefly. "Although Hollywood ain't what it was, either."

"Things have changed a lot in the past 50 years," he agreed. "Okay. You're a shade and you're here — what's your beef?"

"Is that any way to talk to a lady?" He merely glared at her. "Okay. Word in Limboland is that you're the guy to talk to back here in the land of the living," she explained, her voice dropping into the husky tone she'd made famous in screwball comedy films of the '30s and '40s. "Y'got somethin' you need to take care of, you're the man to see."

"Yeah, that's me," Michael affirmed with a note of bitterness.

For two years he'd been acting as the local shade waystation between the living, Limbo, and the next world. Private detective to the dear and not-so-dear departed, that was Michael Burton. He was getting tired of deceased people showing up every time he thought his life was getting normal. He was definitely tired of other people's — dead people's — problems.

He was also tired of being the only person who could see or hear these visitors from the afterlife. His cosmically-tuned-in friend, Annie Brighton, believed in them, but that didn't make it any easier when he found himself talking to what appeared to be no-one-there.

He was especially tired of it interfering with his job as a detective. He was a good cop, efficient and effective at his job. It was being a good cop that had put him in this situation — two years ago, he'd been killed — as in *dead* — during a stakeout that had gone bad. He'd been clinically dead long enough to make a quick stopover in a weird place he'd later learned was Limbo. The paramedics had revived him, but ever since then, he — and the small piece of bullet shell still lodged in his head — had been a magnet to ghosts with unfinished business in their old lives to be resolved before they could move on. A channeller, the shades had called him. A patsy, he often called himself.

Most of all, he was tired of this "gift" interfering with his life as a man. He was an attractive young man in his thirties, with a broad smile and ready wit. Yet he hadn't had a steady girlfriend since before the accident that had put that piece of metal in his head; nobody wanted to stick with an apparent nutcase. Women tired quickly of a man who jumped at things that weren't there, and who talked to people they couldn't see. If it weren't for Annie, he'd probably have been committed by the police shrink Doctor Johnson by now ...

Samantha Marlowe batted her long eyelashes at him, looking up at him coyly. He was still feeling sorry for himself, so it didn't work. "Okay. You got a beef, too. I'll be serious. That blonde bombshell routine's an act I used to put on for the press anyway." She shrugged. "It played with my image in the movies. But you're the only game in town — there isn't anyone else I can go to, and I do have a real problem, honest."

Michael's expression softened slightly. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Well, you know how I died —"

"In a plane crash on your way to a USO show. Very patriotic," he commended with a slight nod of his head, remembering. Samantha Marlowe had died only two years after screwball-comedy-queen Carole Lombard's fatal airplane crash returning from a war-bond rally. The loss of another screen queen had prompted some movie studios to refuse to allow their stars to travel by air to patriotic events. Marlowe had been a popular film legend, winning two Academy Awards, the second right before her death.

Michael wasn't about to admit it, but he was a big fan of hers, and had several of her films on tape at home. "And?" he prompted aloud, already feeling a little guilty for his less-than-gracious welcome to this legendary shade.

"And I left behind a grieving husband —"

"That's right — I read that he never remarried —"

She smiled sweetly. "He was a wonderful man. And we had a wonderful little girl ..."

"I'm sure she's all grown up by now."

"All grown up, and dead, too. She and her husband were killed in a car accident, oh, more than twenty years ago. It's their daughter I'm concerned about."

"Their daughter? You've been hanging around in Limbo all these years because of your granddaughter? But she hadn't even been born by the time you died —"

"Well, I didn't move on right away because I was concerned about what was going to happen to Harrison and Lydia, and then Lydia ran away from home and got married and I wanted to make sure she was going to be all right, and then ... well, everybody just sort of passed away and went on. I never even saw them when they crossed over." She sighed heavily. "I guess I waited too long. But by the time they passed on, it was Lydia's daughter I was worried about."

"Okay. Why are you worried about her now? She's what — over twenty years old, right? She's old enough to take care of herself —"

"Well, when Lydia and her husband died, friends of theirs took care of their daughter. They loved her — that much I could tell. But now they're dead, too. So my granddaughter is all alone, with no family. And Jameson — he's the family lawyer — he doesn't know there's an heir." She looked at him as though that explained everything.

"An heir," Michael repeated. "An heir to what?"

"Well, my fortune, of course. The studio paid me well, and I invested well. And Harrison was brilliant with money. And after I died, he didn't spend it on anything but Lydia. And when she took off ..." she shook her head sadly. "Trust me. There's a great deal of money, just sitting in the bank collecting interest."

"Still?" Michael squeaked in disbelief. "It's been nearly 50 years!"

"Still. Jameson is still administering my estate. My will specified that if there were no claimants, the law firm was to administer my estate. I'm worth millions. For all I know, there's an inheritance from Harrison, too." She picked at the spaghetti strap of the satin gown. "I could probably use a few bucks and pick up a new wardrobe while I'm in town, too."

"I doubt they accept Spook Express on Rodeo Drive," he reminded.

She shrugged, a shrug that had been famous in the '40s and had driven men wild. She gave him the look that had made her a pin-up girl in hundreds of American barracks in the Pacific and European theaters of war. He simply stared at her, his patience again wearing visibly thinner with each pose.

"Boy, you're a hard sell! Okay. Here it is — I want you to help me find my granddaughter, get the proof that she *is* my granddaughter, and help her claim her inheritance."

"Why now?"

She frowned slightly. "The poor kid's all alone in the world. Her adopted mother just recently died, and her adopted father passed away a couple of years ago — I can feel her grief, even if I don't know anything else about her. At least if she can be identified as my heir, she not only gets the money, she gets some family — cousins, aunts and uncles, that sort of thing."

For the first time since Samantha Marlowe had materialized in the auction room, Michael smiled. "That's nice. Any idea of where to start?"

"Well ... there's got to be a marriage license on file."

"From what ... 1960-something?"

"Hmm. Jameson Page — as I said, he's the lawyer administering my estate — he'd know when Lydia ran away from home. She and her father quarrelled, very angry, very hurtful, over someone Lydia loved, I think."

"Wait a minute — most shades can't even remember the exact details of their deaths, but you know stuff that's gone on in your family's lives since you died — what makes you different?"

She pursed her lips a moment, an expression that appeared on hundreds of movie magazines during her career. Columnists had called it the "Marlowe Mouth." "Well, it's not something I let get around ..."

"Yeah?"

"But ... well, I'm sort of descended from ... you know, witches."

"Witches?"

"That's what some people call them. Nowadays, I don't know what you call them — psychics, channellers ... but I was always sort of tapped into the other side. I even had a spirit guide who gave me advice on which films to do — and she was never wrong. I would have turned down *Love Happy* if it hadn't been for her — and that was my biggest success. And my second Oscar. The critics stopped comparing me to Lombard and Colbert with that one. Anyway, when I got over there, it was like I was suddenly tapped into this side. Only until today, I haven't really been able to communicate with anyone still alive. I've only picked up on strong emotions — that's how I know there was a fight and deaths — anger and grief are pretty easy to sense. To be honest, I don't even know what my granddaughter's name is or what she looks like, just how much her mother loved her. And how lonely she is now."

"Reverse channelling. That's weird."

"Tell me about it."

"Michael? Michael, are you out here?" came the voice of his companion.

"Cheese it! I'll see you later!" Samantha Marlowe promised, suddenly fading from view.

"Veronica!" Michael greeted, glancing over his shoulder to assure himself that Samantha had indeed gone. "Are they done already?"

Veronica shrugged, casting a wistful look back at the auction room. "For me, anyway. I lost it to the head of Monumental Pictures. Said it would make a great prop in this film they're doing about a psychic investigator from England. Can you imagine?" she scoffed.

Michael shook his head. "No," he lied. "Don't believe in the stuff myself."

"Good," she told him, taking his arm. "Why don't you take me out to dinner and help me forget my loss?"

He grinned at her. "Sure. Let's go."

* * *

Next day in the squad room, Burton asked his friend and sometimes partner, Liz Carmeli, to do a background check on Samantha Marlowe, including a search for next of kin.

"What are you into now, Michael?" she asked, taking the slip of paper from the detective. A slim and athletic-looking woman, Liz had short blonde hair and a waif-like face. She had worked with him on several cases and knew his instincts to be as frequently accurate as they were weird. She studied him warily. "Is this another one of your 'hunches'?"

He squirmed uncomfortably. "Hey, you know me. I get interested in things. I was at an auction yesterday and some stuff of hers went up — people were talking about the stuff and her and a possible descendant — I'm curious."

"You think there was something shady about the auction?" Liz pressed. "That's bunco, not homicide."

"Well, let's just say some questions got raised in my mind. I'd like to get some answers before I do anything with it," he explained, turning on his charm.

"Well ... okay. But you owe me, Mick Burton. And someday I'm gonna expect you to pay up," she warned, waving the paper under his nose.

"Thanks, Liz. How about dinner some night?"

"You're on," she agreed, breaking into a grin.

"Okay," he replied with a fond smile.

She left to return to her desk, leaving Burton to face the mammoth task of clearing paperwork from his overloaded desk.

"Smooth operator," he heard from somewhere behind him.

"Samantha," he whispered. She materialized on the edge of his desk, her slim body draped in a cowled dress of royal blue, its skirt slit up nearly to her hips. "Y'know, I always thought the '40s were kind of ... well, puritanical. You'd never know it by the way you dress."

She beamed at him. "Like it? You know — Hollywood stars were expected to be flamboyant. I got used to it after a while. So — what have you got for me?"

He shook his head. "I've asked for an information search on your family — we'll see what that brings up. But is there anything that would identify your granddaughter? Some family trait, a keepsake?" he asked quietly, keeping his head down so no one would realize he was talking to the corner of his desk.

She thought for a moment. "Well ... there was a locket I gave to Lydia. Little heart, about so big," she spread her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "It was made for her. She might have given it to her daughter. I hope she did, anyway."

"And how would that identify her?"

"It's engraved. Says 'Be Love Happy Always'."

"And would your family lawyer recognize it?"

"You bet. He helped me pick it out. It's platinum, with one perfect diamond in the center of the heart. I had it made at Cody and Sons Jewelers."

"Hmm. They're still in business, up in the Hills. Something that was custom-made, they might even still have records on it."

"Oh, Cody was a fanatic for records. He had ledgers going back 100 years, to when his family was making jewelry for the crowned heads of Europe."

"Okay, well that's one place we can check."

* * *

"Ah, Detective, a custom piece like that would have been well-documented. But what is your interest, may I ask?" the current Cody of Cody and Sons asked as he ushered Burton down the hallway from the store to his office.

"I'm, ah, following up on a hunch, I guess you could say. A rumor, really. I picked it up when I was at an auction recently."

"Oh? The AIDS auction, perhaps?"

Burton nodded. "Some people were talking. Idle gossip, probably. But worth following up — in my free time. I appreciate your seeing me at lunchtime."

Cody waved the inconvenience away dismissively. "And that gossip was? Ah, here we are," he announced, opening the door to his office.

"That Samantha Marlowe might actually have a descendent."

They entered the office and Bryant Cody gestured toward a worn, comfortable-looking chair. Burton seated himself as Cody went to his desk. The jeweller shook his head. "Her death was truly tragic. My father used to talk of her often — she was one of his favorite customers. Always a delight, and always looking for the unusual. He really got a chance to practice his art in designing jewelry for her. I remember he was devastated at her death, even though I was just a child. So many greats were lost during that War — Carole Lombard, Glenn Miller ..." He shook his head again. "Tragic. She did have a daughter, a lovely girl. She ran away from home sometime in the early sixties. Of course, she was above the age of consent, but her father took it hard."

"That's what I heard. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Cody thought for a moment, then indicated the negative. "No. Lydia Marlowe wasn't really interested in jewelry — her interests ran more to books and such. A good thing actually — her mother's collection disappeared, you see. There was a quiet investigation at the time of Miss Marlowe's death, but nothing turned up. Actually, the disappearance of that collection is why my father kept the records intact — and why we had all the records computerized —" he gestured toward the computer on his desk, "— in the hopes that someday they'd turn up, and we'd have proof of their origins." He shook his head sadly, mourning the loss of his father's work.

"There must have been insurance on the jewels —"

Cody nodded. "A significant sum, I believe. As I recall, Harrison Marlowe added it to Lydia's trust fund when the insurance company paid up. The jewels were supposed to go to Lydia, you see. But she really didn't care about the jewels themselves, I think."

"Did you know her well?" Burton asked gently.

Cody shook his head. "I didn't see much of her, although we were of an age. She spent a lot of time away from home, first at school, then at college — I believe she was working on her doctorate before she disappeared. I did go out to the house shortly before that to appraise what was left of the Marlowe Collection — her father's family heirlooms, actually, quite old and very beautiful, but not the magnificent pieces my

father had designed for Miss Marlowe." He slipped once more into a brief reverie in remembrance of those lost baubles.

"And?" Michael prompted.

"I believe there was a man, someone of whom her father disapproved," Cody replied, smiling apologetically and getting back to the subject at hand. "Lydia was quite headstrong, in a quiet sort of way. Not fiery, like her mother could be, just determined, so I'm told."

"Do you think you could check into this locket for me ...?"

"Of course." Cody turned to the computer terminal on his desk. "Let's see ... that would have been about what, 1943? 1944? Before the end of the War — Miss Marlowe died en route to a USO benefit. Yes." He punched a few keys, scanning the information that scrolled past him on the monitor. "Ah. Here we are. My — platinum. And a blue diamond in the center of the heart. Amazing. Oh, this is curious."

"What's that?" Michael asked, getting up and coming around to look at the terminal. On the screen was displayed a digitized image of the locket, with information organized on the lower part of the screen.

"The locket was designed to hold something very specific. A key. The key was provided to my father, and he designed the locket around it. How very odd."

"No indication what the key was for?" Michael questioned.

Cody looked up from the screen. "No. I don't imagine my father was ever told ... and in our business, it pays to be discreet. I'm sure he never asked."

"Hmm. Is there any way I could get a picture of this locket? I mean, it could very well help to identify —"

"Of course." Cody hit a series of keys and smiled up at Burton. "Modern technology. That'll print out at the secretary's desk. We can pick it up on your way out. Now — what sorts of things did they have at the auction? And who was there? I love celebrity auctions, but I was unable to attend. Do tell ..."

* * *

The next day, Burton was unable to work on the afterlife case of Samantha Marlowe. His superior officer, Lieutenant Wesley, had roared out of his office, spied Michael hiding behind a prodigious pile of paperwork, and ordered him to clear up every one of those casefiles before he left that day. Grumbling and swearing softly, Michael attacked the paper with something less than enthusiasm, but managed to clear at least one of the piles by lunchtime. While his comrades slipped out of the squad room to enjoy their lunches outside in the good weather, Michael remained at his desk, gnawing disinterestedly at a pizza he'd ordered in from the shop around the corner from the station.

"Ah, you're here," Liz said. Michael looked up hopefully, bestowing a sour grin on her.

"Here now, here forever," he complained, waving a hand at the slowly diminishing piles of manilla folders.

"Well, you shouldn't let it get piled up," she commented. "If you kept up with your paperwork, it wouldn't get like this." She settled herself on a recently excavated corner of his desk. "I don't know if you want to add this to the clutter," she added, waving a file under his nose.

"What's this?" he asked, eyeing the folder suspiciously.

"This," she announced with some ceremony, "is the stuff of movies. I had to do some real digging — Samantha Marlowe did have a daughter," she paused, looking for a reaction. Michael nodded encouragingly. "Okay. You knew that." She opened the folder, scanning the contents. "Well, this daughter was nothing like her mother," she outlined. "She had a coming out party in the late fifties, but that's about all that ever showed up about her in the society columns. She attended UCLA, then got her masters at Berkeley — quite a scholar, it appears. She was working on her doctorate at Berkeley in the early sixties. Then in 1964, she cleared out her savings account and disappeared. That's when she showed up in the newspapers again."

"There was a search."

"Nationwide. Apparently Harrison Marlowe had a lot of money of his own — he was East Coast blueblood, it seems, and Samantha Marlowe had left her husband very well off. He funded the search, offered a million dollar reward to whoever could find her."

Michael whistled. "A million bucks in 1964 was really worth something, too. Not that it's peanuts today. And?"

"And nothing. Lydia Marlowe didn't want to be found. She had quite a lot of money herself, from her mother. She managed to hide herself pretty effectively." She glanced at the pizza on his desk possessively. "Can I have a slice? I haven't had lunch yet."

"But you found her," Michael provided with a grin, offering the pizza box.

Liz took a little bow, put down her folder, lifted a slice of pizza out of the box, and took a bite, closing her eyes with pleasure. Then she got back to business, chewing quickly to resume her story. "Well, they didn't have the data network then that we do now. I cross-checked drivers' licenses, marriage licenses, death certificates, that sort of thing ... and came up with a marriage license. In 1966. The year Harrison Marlowe died."

"And her married name was?" Michael was starting to feel like he was on a game show.

"Rubenstein. She married Professor Howard Rubenstein of Berkeley University in 1966."

Michael could imagine what must have happened. His only daughter intended to marry a man older than herself, and of a different ethnic origin to boot. The Civil Rights movement of the '60s had barely begun by 1964, and racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice was still very much condoned by society. Harrison Marlowe's blue blood had been able to overlook the notoriety of his being married to a popular film star — she at least had been part of Hollywood society — but this had been unacceptable. And Lydia had probably seen him as a close-minded bigot, unwilling to overcome his own prejudices for the sake of her happiness. He was sure that was the source of the argument that had driven Lydia Marlowe into hiding. Liz was right — this was the sort of thing that fueled films and soap operas alike.

Michael nodded. "So what happened to Lydia and Howard Rubenstein?""

"Well, I cross-checked the marriage license with wedding announcements in the area — the license says they were married in Oakland. Apparently, he was a professor of literature at Berkeley. Fifteen years older than Lydia. The wedding announcement in the newspaper even says that Lydia was Samantha's daughter. I guess by then, with both her parents dead, she didn't feel she needed to hide anymore."

"Hiding in plain sight," Michael murmured. "I wonder why the family lawyer didn't track her down then — I mean, she must have had quite an inheritance coming to her from her father."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" She took the opportunity to finish off the slice while Burton considered the possibilities. She looked hopefully at the remaining pizza, and Michael grinned. She took another slice and munched.

"Usually when a rich person dies, there's a search for heirs. Or the heir comes forward to claim their inheritance," he said.

"Mmmm. I checked that. The will's a matter of public record, and the newspapers ran a piece on it at the time. Harrison's will specifically mentions Lydia — he cut her off without a dime. But it does make provisions for her offspring. Apparently, the inheritance was to be kept in trust for her children. So he was punishing his daughter for marrying somebody he didn't like, but not any children of the marriage. He must have been pretty hurt to do something like that."

"Yeah. And he died before he could have a change of heart." Michael shook his head sadly. Samantha had said that she'd never seen Harrison's shade, so apparently when he'd died, he'd felt no remorse for disinheriting his daughter — nothing to keep him cooling his spectral heels in Limbo. Burton wondered how he felt now, almost 30 years later — had they reconciled when Lydia herself had died?

Liz licked grease from her fingers and frowned as a new thought struck her. "You know — I hope you don't think sharing your pizza with me gets you off the hook." He looked up at her quizzically. "About dinner. I put a lot of work into this search — you still owe me a dinner. And not Burger King," she warned seriously.

"You got it," he chuckled. "So long as the tab doesn't exceed my annual salary, you can pick the place. You got anything on the granddaughter?"

She wiped her fingers off with a paper napkin, scrunched it up and tossed it in the wastebasket. She picked up the file again and read off, "Howard and Lydia Rubenstein had a daughter, named Emma Ann, born in 1967. Then in 1971, Howard and Lydia were killed in a car accident between San Francisco and Oakland. Bad weather, skidded on the bridge and slammed into the abutment. Killed on impact. Nasty," she added, shaking her head.

"And the daughter? Was she with them?"

"No. It appears they'd left her with some friends while they took this trip. Their will made this couple guardians, so the courts just confirmed it. She was adopted in 1972, and her name was changed to ... ah ... 'Charles'."

"Okay. So we've established that there's an heir. Where is she now?"

"What do you think I am — a miracle worker?" Liz protested.

"Certainly looks that way to me," he answered, indicating the file she held.

She beamed, preening. "Well, I do know my way around a data base. All those years at Northside weren't a waste."

"And do you think you can tweak that data base to cough up her current location? Please?"

"Well, if it's that important to you ..."

Samantha resolved at the opposite corner of the desk, clad this time in a fashionable suit in '40s style. A decorative hat with a netting veil perched atop her stylish chignon. She settled on the edge of the desk and turned imploring eyes on Michael.

"It's that important to me, Liz. I think you've learned enough to make me think it's worthwhile finding this Emma Charles."

"Me, too. It's really kind of romantic in a way, don't you think? I mean, a long-lost heiress to a movie star's fortune ..." she sighed heavily. "Okay. I'll get back to you with what I find. And Michael —"

"Yeah?"

"Make that dinner and dancing ..." She smiled sweetly, handing him the folder, and left the squad room.

"Drives a hard bargain," Samantha commented. "May I?" she asked, reaching for the folder.

Michael handed it to her absently. He was so caught up in his thoughts about the "case" that he failed to notice that to anyone else in the room, it would appear that the folder was floating in mid-air. All-too-frequently, Burton forgot that he was the only living person capable of seeing his spectral companions. With Liz gone, there was no one else there right now, but someday, that slip of the mind might get him into trouble.

She flipped through the computer-printed and microfiche-copied sheets idly. "A lot of sadness. I had no idea Harrison had been so angry — to disinherit his own daughter! Emma ... that's a pretty name. Michael ..."

Roused from his reverie, Michael looked up at Samantha Marlowe. He noticed then that she was still holding the folder, and gently took it out of her hands and laid it on the desk. "Don't want anyone to think I'm practicing magic," he told her in a low voice.

She smiled at him and shook her head, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, the fabric of her hat's veil tickling his face. "Thank you." She smiled down at him, a sincere smile that she had always reserved for off-screen and away from cameras.

For the first time, he felt that he was really making contact with Samantha the person and not Samantha the personality. He patted her hand with his own. "You're welcome. We haven't found her yet, though. But if anybody can track down the information, it's Liz. She's pretty amazing."

"She likes you, too. Fortunately for you, not enough to be more than just good friends," she smiled more broadly. "I told you — I sense strong emotions among the living." Her expression turned serious. "Which brings me to this Veronica you're seeing — I don't think she's good for you, you know."

He closed his eyes, grimacing. "I know. You said I could do better. What is it about you shades that you think you can run my love life, huh?" he demanded. He shook his head, "Look, let's just concentrate on finding your granddaughter, and you leave my love life to me, okay?"

She pursed her lips, considering whether or not to be offended. She decided not to be and smiled. "Okay," she agreed.

The clamor of Michael's fellow detectives returning from their lunch break echoed up the hallway in advance of the men and women. Samantha wiggled her fingers in farewell and faded from sight.

Michael smiled, lifted the last piece of pizza from the box, cold now but still edible, and bit into it.

* * *

It was two more days before Michael could do anything about Samantha Marlowe's problem. Liz had managed to dig up an address in Fullerton based on DMV files, but Michael wanted to know more before he approached Emma Charles. He made an appointment to meet with Samantha's attorney, Jameson Page, for 5:30 that evening. The lawyer, now in his 80s, had suggested the early evening meeting rather than a lunch appointment. Burton, still struggling to reduce the pile of folders to nothing, was grateful for the time, late enough so he could make a dent in the stack, early enough that he'd be ready for his date with Veronica.

He drove up into the parking lot across the street from the old building, and smoothed back his hair one more time. No matter how many lawyers offices he'd visited in his years as a police officer, he was never comfortable in them. He told himself he was being silly, but all that education and all that money still made him feel like a kid with chocolate ice cream smeared on his face.

As he entered the Simmons Building, its stucco a brilliant white despite the smog, he felt even more inconsequential. This was old Los Angeles, preserved in time so that he felt he was taking a step back to the glory days of the film industry, when money had flowed through the city like molten gold. He stepped up to the desk and told the uniformed guard his name and purpose. The guard looked him up and down, his expression critical; Michael felt he had just been tested and found wanting. He straightened the cuffs on his corduroy jacket, and fiddled with his tie while he awaited the guard's verdict. Surreptitiously, he smoothed his hair again.

"Mr. Page will see you now," announced the guard imperiously. "Take the left elevator to the fifth floor."

Michael smiled nervously and did as he was told. Just as he had expected, an elevator operator stood in the plush interior of the car, standing at attention as Burton got on board. "Floor?"

"Fifth," Michael answered tersely.

The door creaked shut with a wheeze. Suddenly, the operator broke into a grin. "Don't let Fred get to you. He likes to think that this is a military installation, and that he's the commandant. I like to think of it as a little piece of LA history, a living museum. You wait 'til you see the law offices on Five — you'll see what I mean."

By the time the ancient elevator had cranked its laborious way to the fifth floor, Michael and the operator, Joe, were laughing. "Hey, good luck," Joe called as Michael stepped out of the elevator into the sumptuous pile of the law office carpet. "I'll see you on your way out."

"Thanks," Burton replied, looking around him. The cavernous main lobby of the office was straight out of a movie set of the '30s. A good thirty feet away from the elevator bank sat the heavy mahogany receptionist's desk, an old-fashioned PBX set into the wall. The deep-piled crimson carpet runner led to an enormous pair of deeply carved doors, while gleaming marble tile set in a black and white diamond pattern stretched away to smaller doors to the left and right. Decorative moldings edged in gold defined the cathedral ceiling, and teardrops of Austrian crystal dripped from the massive chandelier dominating the center of the magnificent vault.

"Pretentious, I know," came a whispery voice like dry leaves. "It serves its purpose, however. And the building itself is on the National Register of Historic Places. Under 'anachronistic but gaudy', I believe."

The source of the voice was an incredibly tall man, only slightly bent by age. His deeply-tanned skin was stretched taut over high cheekbones, his snow-white brows straight over clear blue eyes. A smile spread over his face as he extended his hand toward Burton. "You'll forgive me if I don't make that horrendous trek to you — age does have its prerogatives, you know."

Burton returned the smile and crossed the space to take the old man's hand. He had a strong grip, despite the slight deformity of his fingers due to arthritis. "Mr. Page?" Michael asked deferentially.

"Detective Burton. Come inside," he gestured toward the office beyond the massive doors.

If the anteroom was epic in its proportions and style, the office of Jameson Page was cluttered and comfortable and deeply personal. Recently-oiled hardwood panels made up the walls of the room, with ceiling-high bookcases built into the walls and crammed with heavy volumes. Books and papers accumulated on every surface not taken up with film memorabilia; framed, autographed photographs hung on the walls, dwarfing by their numbers the many diplomas from prestigious universities. Pride of place was taken by a circle of photographs of Samantha Marlowe in her prime — some studio shots, some candids, including one with two young men, one tall and muscular, one even taller and much slighter. Beneath the photos sat a gleaming gold statue: the Academy Award Samantha had won for *Love Happy*.

"You must have been very close to Miss Marlowe," Michael said at last, gesturing toward the Oscar.

"Yes. I introduced her to Harrison — we'd been roommates at Harvard. I was always captivated by the screen — if I hadn't been so afraid of what my family would say, I might well have pursued a career in the films. Samantha always said I had the gift," he added wistfully.

"Yeah, well, from my experience, a good trial lawyer needs that gift," Michael responded warmly.

This delighted Page, and he clapped his hands together in applause. "Please, have a seat, Detective. I'm afraid I can't offer any alcohol — doctor's orders — but I can offer you some mineral water ...?" Michael nodded acceptance, and while he seated himself in an ancient but well-upholstered leather chair, Jameson Page busied himself arranging a silver drinks tray.

Setting the tray in the middle of the enormous old desk, Page lowered himself into his own chair, steepled his fingers, and stared across at Michael. "Now, Detective — what can I do for you?"

"Well," Michael began, taking a sip of the mineral water, noting absently that the crystal was cut, not molded. "I was at a charity auction last week — you know, one of those celebrity things where they auction off memorabilia from films and stars' lives — and someone mentioned that they thought that Samantha Marlowe might actually have an heir still living. I'm a big fan of hers, so I got a little curious."

"So this is not an official investigation," Page surmised quietly. "I had wondered what interest the police might have in Miss Marlowe at this late date."

"No," Burton replied with a smile. "I admit I did use police resources to do a search, and I think I might have found that heir."

This did surprise Page. "An heir? Well, of course there was Miss Marlowe's daughter, Lydia, but she collected her inheritance when her mother died. She used some of it for her education, some of it to fund her special passion — books. And some of it, I imagine, to run away with," he explained, his voice growing colder with each sentence. Obviously, Mr. Jameson Page had not approved of Lydia's choice of husband either.

"But Mr. Marlowe's will set aside a fund for her children, if there were any." At Page's raised eyebrow, he elucidated, "The will's a matter of public record."

"Ah, yes. But no such heir has ever come forward, Detective. Not in almost 30 years."

"That heir wouldn't — not if he or she didn't know they were an heir," Burton countered.

"No ... no, I suppose not. And I suppose you've tracked down this mythical heir?" Page asked skeptically. "Someone to claim this inheritance — and believe me, it is a significant sum of money we're discussing."

"The records check I had run uncovered a daughter, born to Lydia and Howard Rubenstein," Michael stated. "Born in Oakland, California in 1967. Four years before Lydia and Howard were killed in a car accident."

Page leaned back in surprise. Michael allowed himself a small smile of triumph: both Page and Harrison Marlowe had been very careful to keep Rubenstein's name out of the press; no one had known the name of the man Lydia had planned to marry. Page nodded, impressed. "You *have* done your homework, young man. And what do you get out of this?"

Michael shrugged. "Nothing really. As I said, I was curious. I'm a detective — I like puzzles. And that's all it was, really, until I actually found that there was a real heir."

"And when might I meet this heir, Detective?"

"I don't know. I haven't gotten in touch with her yet. After her parents died, she was taken in by friends of her parents. They'd been cited as guardians in her parents' will, and they adopted her. She might not even

know who her real parents were. I doubt very seriously she has any idea that she's Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter."

"So what is it you want of me, then? Permission to go meet her? You realize what all this sounds like, Detective."

Michael nodded. "Like a scam to defraud the estate of Samantha Marlowe for the inheritance. Yes, I know what it must sound like. Quite honestly, I have no interest in bringing this young woman here for an unpleasant experience. It's not fair and it's not right. That's why I brought my research — you can verify it for yourself, contact her yourself if you like." Michael extracted a large manilla envelope from a pocket inside his jacket; the envelope was dog-eared and wrinkled and bore the insignia of the LAPD. He handed it across to Page.

Page accepted the envelope, opened it, and scanned the contents for a few moments. He looked over at Michael, his expression subtly changed. "Perhaps I've misjudged you, Detective. This all appears to be quite in order. The wonders of modern communications technology," he praised.

"Hmm. Detective Carmeli — that's the person I asked to do the checks — did say that our information retrieval capabilities are considerably more advanced than they would have been in 1964. In a way, it's a little unnerving — no one really has any secrets anymore."

"Yes, I agree. I'm afraid I haven't really acclimated to this electronic world. I would like to look into this further. Imagine — an heir after all these years! It really is something right out of one of Samantha's movies, isn't it?"

"You bet it is!" came Samantha's voice. "And there's going to be a happy ending, too." Michael glanced quickly over his shoulder to identify where she was in the room. "Gosh, Jimmy — look how old you've gotten!" She walked forward and went to stand next to the old man, her fingers reaching out to touch the wispy white hair. He shook his head slightly, as though he'd actually felt her touch.

"There's one other thing, Mr. Page," Michael said suddenly. "The people who were talking at the auction — they mentioned a locket, a heart. I don't know — maybe they were hoping it would be offered at the auction. I checked around and talked to Bryant Cody at Cody and Sons Jewelers — he said it was custom made for Miss Marlowe. To contain a key. Do you know anything about that?"

Samantha looked at Michael quizzically, but turned her attention avidly to Page for his answer.

Jameson Page settled back in his chair, his face relaxed in pleasant nostalgia. "That was Samantha's little joke. She called it the key to her heart. It was actually the key to a lock on a trunk she left in my keeping. According to her will, if anything happened to Samantha, the trunk was meant to go to Lydia when she turned 21. Lydia never claimed it, I never knew why — perhaps she was too involved in her studies to remember a dusty old trunk. I still have it. I have no idea what's inside it." He sighed and Samantha relaxed. Michael noted that reaction and filed it away. "Lydia had the locket. Quite possibly her daughter has it now. That would certainly be incontrovertible proof in my eyes of her legitimacy as an heir, but after all these years ... I wouldn't be at all surprised if Lydia had sold it. It was worth a fortune in itself."

Samantha started indignantly. "She wouldn't sell that! It was a gift from her mother!"

"Platinum and a blue diamond. Quite an expensive little bauble to give a child." Samantha made a face at him.

"Samantha was like that. Extravagant gifts. Her will was really quite generous — she left considerable sums not only to Lydia, but to all the servants and people from the studio. As I recall, at least one of them invested the money and eventually started his own studio."

Samantha was sitting on the edge of the desk now, smiling fondly at Page. "He's really just an old softie, you know. He was always a dear."

"Did she leave you anything, Mr. Page?" Burton asked quietly. "If that's not too impertinent ... ?"

Page's eyes widened in surprise, but his face softened with a smile. "No, not really. It's a matter of public record too, I suppose. There was money, of course, but that was really just a token — she knew I didn't really need it." At Michael's upraised eyebrows, he chuckled. "Oh, I know — most people feel you can't have too much money. But my tastes are generally simple, and I have a family fortune of my own — and a lawyer, even one at my age, can command significant fees. No, the thing she left me which meant the most was that statuette," he said, indicating the Oscar. "That and her studio stock. My ticket to the world of the movies. I still hold that stock, and used its influence to begin a restoration of her old films. It's almost complete, and there will be a screening in a few weeks."

Samantha beamed at Page's recollections. She reached her hand out to him again and touched his face. Again he moved his head as though he'd felt her.

"I'd like to see that, Mr. Page."

"If all goes well, I'm sure I can arrange for a ticket or two for you. When one gets as old as I am, one feels the right to indulge in a ... fancy or two. I shall enjoy playing movie mogul for an evening," he added with a smile.

Michael smiled back. "I'd appreciate that. Well, I also appreciate your time, Mr. Page. I won't keep you any further —"

"Detective Burton ..." Page began. "Detective Burton, I appreciate the fact that you stopped by. It's not often I get a chance to talk about Samantha these days — so few people remember her, only what they see in poorly maintained prints on television. They don't do her justice. This restoration should revive interest in her work." He closed the file Burton had given him, and planted his hands palms-down on the desk to lever himself out of the chair. Standing, he extended his hand to Burton. "Thank you for bringing this young woman to my attention. I promise you I will look further into it. If I satisfy myself that she is genuine, would you like to meet her?"

"Say yes!" Samantha urged.

Michael opened his mouth and paused. Then he smiled. "Yeah. I think I would like to meet her. Let me know." He fished out his billfold and extracted a card and scribbled his home phone number on it. "Call me at the station or at home when you know something," he added, handing Page the card.

"I will." Page moved slowly around the desk and escorted Michael to the door of his office. "Goodbye, Detective."

"So long, Mr. Page. I'll look forward to hearing from you."

The door closed softly behind Michael, and Samantha passed through the wall to join him. Together they began the long walk across the anteroom to the elevator bank.

"He's still got quite a thing for you, Sam," Michael told her as they walked.

"For me?" she asked, genuinely surprised. She glanced back over her shoulder at the office door. "I never realized ... poor Jimmy. I always wondered why he never found himself a good woman."

"Good women are hard to find, Sam," Michael replied with a smile. "Now, are you going to tell me what that key is for?"

Samantha stopped, holding him back with a hand on his arm. "Later. I will tell you, but later. Let's get Emma what she deserves. And then I'll answer any of your questions, Michael."

"Promise?" She nodded in reply. "Okay. Now I've got a date — with a good woman. I'll see you later."

She dissolved from view. As he pressed the call button for the elevator, he heard her say, "They're harder to find than you think, Michael ..."

* * *

Burton winced as he noted that the menu bore no prices; that always boded ill for his wallet. He was wearing his one good suit, and was keenly aware that it was several years out of date. Dimitrio's was one of the places one went to be seen, one where image was critical to success; he hoped he didn't embarrass Veronica by looking so ... out of step.

It was a tribute to Veronica's stature in the film industry that they'd gotten a reservation at all. While it was not a haunt of the upper echelon of the industry, reservations were normally unavailable for weeks and even months at a time, unless one was recognized as truly up and coming. Veronica had made the reservation two days earlier. Michael had to admit to being impressed, and not a little intimidated.

Her chestnut hair was swept back and gathered in an simple but elegant twist, and elaborate, avant garde earrings dangled from her ears. She was attired in a stylish suit of mauve silk, looking much more formal and effortlessly elegant than Michael did in his old suit. She looked up over her menu and smiled. "Don't worry about the prices, Michael. I'm on an expense account."

Michael glanced up from his frowning perusal of the menu, and his frown deepened. "Expense account? I'm not a legitimate expense."

She adjusted her big-frame glasses and smiled conspiratorily. "Well, no, not precisely."

"Not ... precisely. What does that mean?" he asked, warning bells beginning to echo in the recesses of his brain.

"Well ... well, you know this film I'm going to be working on?"

"No."

"Ah. Well, the script — it's by this wonderful new writer, you'll love him — well, it's about ... the darker side of police life. You know — corruption, graft, misuse of power, that sort of thing."

"Uh-huh."

"And of course we're going to need some sort of ... well, technical advisor," she added, laughing softly.

"There's a department that handles that sort of thing," he reminded her warily.

"Oh, I know," she dismissed it with a wave of her finely-manicured hand. "Public relations people. Not real cops. Not like you," she pointed out, a tiny furrow appearing in her brow.

"No. I'm a detective," Michael agreed.

"Right. You're out there, in the front line. You've seen what it can be like. And after that wretched Rodney King business, the public is looking for an inside view of the police department —"

"Oh," Michael said, nodding his head. "I see."

Her smile was smug as she leaned back in her chair. She regarded him possessively. "I knew you would. I'm looking to make a film about truth, not public relations. Sort of a docudrama, only more realistic. Not movie-of-the-week kind of stuff. You see what I mean?"

"Hmmm."

"And the viewpoint of a real cop — an honest cop — could really make the difference. I mean, you can't see the darkness if you don't have light for contrast."

"Right."

"There will be a retainer, of course. Not large — it's a small-budget film — but something, you know, for your time. I mean, I knew you'd want to do it to help me ... Michael?"

Burton rose slowly, folding his napkin and placing it on the table in front of him. He straightened his jacket and simply looked at her.

Veronica's mouth slowly fell open. Michael stood staring at her for a moment longer, then shook his head. Without saying a word, he turned and left the restaurant.

Samantha was leaning against the outside wall of the restaurant, her arms folded over her chest. As Michael came out into the cool night air, she pushed away from the wall and fell in step with him.

"I don't want to hear a word," he snapped, angrily speeding up his steps.

"Michael, I'm sorry. I had no idea what was wrong, only that she had no real strong feeling for you," Samantha said urgently, laying her hand on his arm and arresting his forward advance. With an effort, Michael turned to look at her, and she touched his face gently. "I know you're hurt, Michael. Your ego is stung. But she's not worth it — and she's not worth *you*. You're a good man. You have so much to offer — and not just to shades like me. There's a living woman out there for you, you just have to find her."

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled sourly. "Ever since this ... this hunk of junk got lodged in my head, I haven't had a decent relationship, I have no privacy, there are dead people popping in and out of my life — I've had enough!"

He wrenched free of her, and stormed away down the street toward his car. Looking sadly after him, she slowly faded from view.

* * *

Burton slammed the door of his apartment with a satisfying bang, tore off his jacket and tossed it on the floor, and flung himself on the couch to enjoy a truly monumental pity party. Driving around the city for a couple of hours hadn't helped to soothe the bitter sting of being used, although he had been able to vent some of his frustration against the other drivers on the freeway. He glowered at the emptiness in his apartment, and cursed the emptiness in his life. He especially cursed himself and his naiveté in thinking that someone like Veronica Howles was interested in him for himself.

It was then that he noticed the blinking light on his answering machine. He grimaced and returned momentarily to his wallow in self-pity. Even Buster, his cat, was absent, probably out romancing some unsuspecting purebred or playing kitty poker with his buddies. But finally curiosity got the better of him, and he got up off the couch and went over to the answering machine.

The first message was from Veronica; the machine's readout noted the call was received at 11:00 p.m., a couple of hours after he'd left the restaurant. "Michael, I'm sorry I upset you — I thought you knew what my

film was about. I honestly didn't mean to — well, I do like you, Michael. I thought you'd want to help. I had no idea ... well, call me, okay?"

"Hmmph. When hell freezes over," he snorted, pressing the erase key.

The second message was from Jameson Page, logged in a little past 11:30, shortly before he'd come in. "Detective Burton. Hello. I apologize for calling so late, but it has taken me some time to verify your information." Michael whistled softly; Page obviously wielded considerable clout in the state to have verified that information in only a few short hours — and *after* business hours, at that.

"I have investigated both the documents you left in my care — and you. I hope you won't mind. You're a very modest young man; you are very highly regarded in the Police Department, and your honesty has been lauded by everyone I spoke to. I have located Emma Charles, and I spoke to her earlier this evening. I hope you will forgive yet another indiscretion — I have told her that you will meet her tomorrow evening and bring her to my office. I feel you should be here too when I speak to her about her inheritance — after all, if it weren't for you, the young lady would never have known about her grandmother. You were right — she didn't know Samantha Marlowe was her grandmother." He rattled off the address Liz had found, in the Los Angeles suburb of Fullerton, and added a time when she would be expecting Burton. He ended with, "And by the way — she still has the locket. She'll bring it with her. At last — an old mystery will be solved." Michael could imagine the smile on the old man's face.

Page's message brought a smile to his own face. He turned off the machine and returned to his seat on the couch, his face thoughtful. Finally, Burton called out, "It's okay, Sam — you can come back now."

Nothing happened for a moment. He looked around, and said, "Really. It's okay. Come on — Page has found Emma."

After a moment, she resolved on the arm of the couch. "It's been a long time since anyone's called me 'Sam'. I always kind of liked that name. Are you okay, Michael?" she asked solicitously, placing her arm around his shoulders.

He shook his head. "I'll recover. It could have been worse." His thoughts touched briefly on the time when another shade — Ruth — had warned him of the intentions of his then-current flame, and she had been right, too. He might just have to start paying more attention to the advice of these unwelcome visitors. "And tomorrow we'll solve your problem and you can move on."

"Yes." She smiled a bittersweet smile. "I can move on at last. How strange that will be — I wonder what it's like up there?"

"I don't know. Nobody's ever come back and told me." He patted her hand resting on his shoulder. "Maybe you'll be able to."

"Mmm. Reverse channelling." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll try."

* * *

The next day, Michael awoke with a sense of anticipation. The end of this particular spectral investigation was in sight, and as ever, he was hopeful that he might just be allowed to get on with his life for awhile. The fact was, he did get a kick out of helping these shades resolve the unfinished business in their lives, and seeing them move on ... some of them he had been sorry to see go, too. Some, he had rejoiced at their departures, a few more avidly than others. He liked solving puzzles; he hadn't been lying to Page when he'd told him that. But he sometimes wished that other people could see these departed visitors; he wouldn't feel such a fool if he weren't the only person who could see and talk to them.

He arrived at the station with a renewed sense of enthusiasm, certain that he would soon be able to go back to business as usual. His positive mood was immediately shattered when he entered the squad room, and saw Lieutenant Wesley waiting for him at the Lieutenant's office door. Wes looked particularly dour this morning, and Michael knew he was in for it. Wordlessly, he followed Wesley's imperious pointing finger into the office. He seated himself in Wesley's visitor's chair and awaited sentencing.

"All right, Michael — what are you up to now?" demanded the Lieutenant roughly.

Average height, portly, gray-haired and slightly balding, Lieutenant Wesley was nonetheless a formidable adversary when he was angry. Michael attempted to joke his way out of a scolding. "Hey, Wes, what're you talking about —"

"The Commissioner gets a call — *after hours, at home, and during dinner* — about one of my men — from the oldest partner in one of the most respected law firms in LA — to verify that he's not on the take. So the Commissioner gets a little curious, calls Internal Affairs. Internal Affairs has a file on this man, but it shows he's clean — they begin to wonder a little, though. And so Internal Affairs calls me. During one of my favorite TV shows, I might add. Seems one of my men is investigating a long-lost heiress, and one of Los Angeles' old guard lawyers is trying to find out if this is a scam to defraud the estate. And this man hasn't told me about it, has he? Well?"

Michael frowned. "Well ... I was seeing this woman," he started, ticking off items on his fingers. "And I went to this auction —" he glanced up to see if Wesley was paying attention; the Lieutenant was focused entirely on him, although not as favorably as he would have liked, "and some people were talking — you know, idle gossip, but it got me thinking."

"Idle gossip. About?"

"About the late Samantha Marlowe. That she might have a descendent no one knew about ..."

"And why would anyone care? She's been dead nearly 50 years!"

Samantha chose that moment to materialize in Wesley's office. She planted her fists on her hips and stuck her tongue out at Wesley. Then she settled herself on the edge of his desk, looking to Michael for her defense.

"Yeah, I know that," Michael agreed, glancing sidelong at Samantha and gesturing for her to keep quiet. "I dunno — you know how Hollywood legends start. I guess there were some things she had at some point that these collectors were interested in — or maybe she never had them, but they were still interested — you know how these myths get started. Anyway, one of them said that all that stuff was in trust of the estate. And another said that wouldn't it be funny if there was an heir to that estate and they didn't even know it ... and you know how I am — I get an idea —"

"And you make my life miserable with it. And did you find this heir?"

Michael said nothing for a moment, then finally nodded. "Yeah. Liz helped me do some research. On her own time," he amended quickly when Wesley was about to protest anew. "And I did my own research on lunch hours and after work. I admit we did use police resources to do the data search, but Wes — we found her. There really is an heir."

"And Jameson Page called to confirm that you weren't a cop on the take," Wesley finished flatly, although a hint of a smile was beginning to play around the corners of his mouth. "An heir, huh? That's something right out of one of her movies, isn't it?" he asked dreamily. "Lovely long-lost heiress, living in poverty, is found by young, virile detective ..." Michael chuckled, and Wesley blushed, harrumphing. "Ahem. So — what now?"

Samantha giggled, clapping her hand over her mouth. Michael shot her a quick glare when Wesley turned around to look out his window.

"Well, Page called me late last night — apparently you told Internal Affairs that I'm not such a bad sort, and IA told the Commissioner, and the Commissioner told him I'm on the up and up," Burton explained. Samantha crossed her arms over her chest and smiled proudly at him while Wesley seated himself behind his desk. "Page is satisfied that I'm straight, and he's apparently satisfied too that this young woman is Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter. So I'm supposed to go meet this heiress tonight and bring her to his office."

"Well, well ... another Hollywood legend is born, eh? I'll hand it to you Michael — you've got the best instincts for the weirdest hunches," Wesley said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, thanks, Wes," Michael replied, abashed. He started to rise.

"And you are going to explain just *where* these weird hunches come from, right?"

"Uh, well, uh — maybe some other time, yeah. Right now, I've still got a stack of paperwork on my desk and I've really gotta get through that — I mean, you know how the DA's office is — you don't cross all your 't's and dot all your 'i's and the case gets thrown out of court, and —" he backed quickly out of the office, leaving Wesley laughing as the door shut behind him.

"Knew that would get the paperwork done," Wesley chuckled to himself.

"Oh ... you!" Samantha swore at Wesley, then walked through the wall to Michael's desk outside.

Burton was already applying himself to the stack of paperwork on his desk, groaning at the new accumulation of folders for his review.

"It wouldn't get like that if you didn't let it pile up," Samantha mimicked Liz. Michael shot her a quelling look. She ignored it with a smile. "Someday you're going to have to tell him, you know."

Michael put down the folder he was leafing through and looked up at her. "You think so?" he asked quietly. He picked up the telephone and pretended he was talking into that instead of to her. "I've already been sent to a police shrink more than once over this. He hears I can actually talk to ghosts ... and my career's history. It was one thing when it was right after my accident ... but two years later? I like being a cop, Sam. It's what I am."

Her expression softened, and she rested a hand on his arm. "I understand that — acting, that's all I know. It's what I am, too. But don't you think he'd understand?"

"I don't understand, and I'm living it! If I didn't have to face it everyday, and if my friend Annie — she's the only one I've ever told about this — wasn't there to help me through it — I'd have gone nuts long ago. There's just no place for ghosts in police work, Sam —"

"No? That's not what I hear in Limboland. You've solved more than one case because of help from ghosts —"

"Help! Hell is more like it —"

"Michael, who're you talking to?" he heard from behind him, and whirled to face Liz. Her expression was concerned as she gestured toward the phone.

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, "My cousin Sam. Real nutcase — thinks he sees ghosts. Let me get rid of him, okay?"

Samantha was fuming at this point and, with a toss of her head, vanished.

"Yeah, Sam, look, I'll talk to you later, okay. You just take your little green pills and it'll be okay. Right. Bye." He put the receiver down, glanced around and found the squad room full of living people only, and turned his attention back to Liz. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I wanted to know ... what's happened?"

"Happened. Oh! I'm gonna meet her tonight, take her to the lawyer. Yeah. Looks like it's all going to work out fine."

She smiled, hugging the folders she carried. "That's nice. Will I get to meet her, too? I mean, after all —"

Michael smiled. "Yeah. I think that's a good idea. I'll ask her if she'd like to come in to meet you. You deserve it, kiddo."

"Thanks. And how about that dinner — tomorrow?"

"You got it!" Feeling better, Michael returned his attention to the stack of paperwork and immediately sighed. A policeman's lot was not always a happy one.

* * *

Michael pulled his car up to the curb, shut off the engine, and looked one more time at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. He ran his fingers through his hair, and grimaced. "That didn't do any good," he said to himself. Straightening his tie, he took a deep breath.

"Well, come on, already!" Samantha demanded, popping into sight sitting in the passenger seat. "I can't see her until you go in there — you know I can't manifest if you're not around!"

"Keep your shirt on, Sam. I — well!" he breathed, looking at her for the first time. She was dressed in a gorgeous suit of black silk, with a high-necked white silk blouse. Rhinestone-studded high heels were on her feet, and her hair was pulled back in an elegant french twist. "You look nice, Sam."

She smiled, ducking her head slightly. "It's not every day you get to meet your own grandchild, Michael. Forgive me if I'm impatient — I've waited a long time for this."

"I know," he sympathized, patting her hand. "Let's not put it off any longer. Come on."

Together they got out of the car and made their way across the little suburban street. Children were playing in the waning hours of the day, riding their bicycles up and down the street, tossing balls, skateboarding. Samantha looked at it with a sigh.

"I could have had a life like this — home, family, kids. I might have lived to see my grandchildren born."

"You wouldn't have been happy — you said yourself, acting is what you are."

She smiled sadly. "Yes. And I am what I am, aren't I? Well, let's not keep her waiting."

Steering her with a hand on her elbow, Michael led the way up the short walk to the front door and knocked. A moment later, a soft female voice answered.

"Yes?"

"Miss Charles — it's me, Michael Burton. Mr. Page sent me."

The sound of a chain being drawn back and a deadbolt thrown answered him, and a moment later, the door opened. Michael caught his breath, staring shamelessly.

Before him, behind the screen door, stood Samantha Marlowe. No, not Sam — she was still standing next to him, as shocked as he was. But looking at Emma Charles, there was no doubt as to the source of her genes — her face was as identical to Sam's as it was possible to be, and her long blonde hair was so pale it was almost white. She picked at the collar of her blouse self-consciously and smiled a self-deprecating smile.

"Won't you come in, Detective? Please?"

Michael roused himself and entered the little house, Sam clinging to his arm as he did so.

Emma closed the door quietly, paused as though composing herself, and turned to face Burton. "Well, Detective. It seems that I owe you a great deal," she said in that same soft voice. The voice wasn't unlike Sam's when she was being serious. A glance around the living room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, periodicals, and papers crowding on bookshelves and tabletops, added to the illusion. He looked at the pile of books on the coffee table, and picked one up. It was a textbook on Middle English.

He turned his attention to her. "Do you? Is this what you want?" he asked seriously.

She shrugged and reached for her glasses on the end table. With them on, the resemblance to her grandmother was lessened. "I've always wanted family. The Charleses were wonderful to me — don't get me wrong. But they were both only children, their own parents were long dead. Now they're both gone, and I've been alone. I thought moving down here to LA might change that ... but I'm not very good at meeting people," she explained with a small, self-conscious laugh. "I've spent my whole life around books. My real parents were both professors, and my adopted parents were, too. It's only natural I followed in their footsteps — I just started teaching English Literature at UCLA this term. I was very fortunate to get the job, actually." She paused, looking off into the middle distance. "You know, it's hard to imagine my mother growing up as the daughter of a famous movie star. What little I remember ... she was very quiet, very studious. I'm told I take after her."

"Your grandmother, too," Michael added. "You look very much like her, you know."

Emma Charles smiled. "Thank you. People have told me that over the years, but I thought it was just a silly coincidence. Here it is genotype." She sighed. "How odd ... I've never had a grandmother. And yet, I feel like ... well, even though she's been dead a long time, I feel like she's with me somehow," she said, a tiny furrow appearing in her pale brow.

Michael smiled as Sam went over to her granddaughter and reached out a trembling hand to touch her face. Emma started at the touch, her frown increasing. She shook her head, her fingers probing the place where Sam's rested. To Burton, it looked as though she were laying her hand over that of her grandmother. "How odd, indeed," she repeated.

"She's got the gift, Michael," Sam breathed. "She *is* my granddaughter! Oh, Michael —" Sam's eyes were filled with tears as she turned back toward Burton.

"Miss Charles —"

"Oh, you must call me Emma. You know so much about me, you've given me ... well, my past, haven't you? I don't believe that my parents — my real parents — ever told my adoptive parents much about themselves. I mean, they were both professors at Berkeley, that much they knew, they all worked together — but their pasts ... it wasn't important, I suppose. But it is to me. What can you tell me about them?"

"First, call me Michael. And it's a long ride to Mr. Page's office — why don't I tell you on the way?"

She smiled that same sad smile. "Yes. Why don't you?" She reached for her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder.

Samantha was gesturing toward her neck, mouthing "Locket," at Michael.

"Oh — did Mr. Page mention anything about a locket to you?"

"Oh. Yes, he did." Her hand reached under her collar and she drew out a chain. At the end of the chain was a heart-shaped locket, with a perfect diamond in the center. "I got a longer chain for it when I got older. But it was my mother's — my real mother's. It's the only piece of jewelry I ever wear. I have all her books, all my father's books. But this always made me feel close to her." She studied it a moment. "I don't really know why — there are all sorts of notes and scribblings in her books, but this," she held it up, "seems to embody her so much more."

Samantha wiped the tears from her face, smiling fondly at Emma. Michael nodded, and gestured toward the door. "Why don't we get going?"

* * *

Fred the guard was on duty again when they entered the lobby of the Simmons Building. This time he was considerably more deferential than he'd been the first time Burton had visited, and Michael was grinning as they approached the elevator bank. As the elevator door clanked open, Joe greeted him warmly.

"So, this is the long-lost heiress, eh? Well, Miss Charles — it's my pleasure to take you to the fifth floor," he welcomed as Michael and Emma stepped onto the elevator.

"My — does everyone know about this?" she breathed.

"Well, it is kind of like a fairy tale, don't you think?" Joe asked cheerfully. "I mean — it's just like something out of the movies, huh?"

Michael had been hearing that phrase a lot of late, and Samantha merely shrugged. Even almost 50 years after her death, drama and mystique still surrounded her.

Page was waiting for them at the secretary's desk when the elevator delivered them to the fifth floor. Joe gave Burton a thumb's up sign and closed the door, and they could hear the elevator wheezing its way back down to the first floor.

Emma's eyes were wide as she tried to take in all the details of the incredible lobby. Burton guided Emma carefully down the carpet runner toward the lawyer, concerned that she might trip as she stared all around her. Samantha walked next to them, but only Michael was able to see her, although Emma whispered to him that she still had that funny feeling that her grandmother was nearby. Finally, they stood before the ancient attorney. He was smiling, his gnarled hand outstretched in welcome.

He stared a long moment at the face of Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter. "I had no idea ... it's as though she's come back to life," he breathed, shaking his head. "But I am being rude — Miss Charles — please, come inside."

* * *

"I can recommend an excellent accountant — with all this newfound wealth, there will be taxes to pay which even the most seasoned aristocrat might find daunting. There are no back-taxes, of course — the estate has kept up with them. But inheritance taxes, et cetera — quite a lot of money will go to the government, I fear, but you are still a very wealthy young lady."

Page, Emma and Michael were all seated in Page's office, and Samantha had seated herself on the edge of the desk next to Page so she could watch her granddaughter. She hadn't said a word to Michael since they'd entered the office, just sat there and drank in the sight of her grandchild.

"I'm not sure I want to know just how wealthy," she replied, chuckling softly.

Page smiled. "Let's just say you won't have to work anymore if you don't choose to. Ever."

"Oh," she answered, eyes wide.

Page inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Now that Detective Burton has helped us both solve one mystery, I would like your help in solving a mystery that has haunted me for nearly 50 years." He gestured toward an old trunk that was sitting between their chairs. "That was your grandmother's. She entrusted it to me while she was still living, oh, perhaps six months or so before that awful plane crash. I have never opened it — the key was not in my possession. It was placed in a locket your grandmother had made for your mother. And which you now wear around your neck."

Emma's hand flew to the locket and closed around it. "I've never opened the locket. I didn't know how —"

"May I?" Page asked, his palm opened to take the locket. Emma looked to Michael, who nodded. She lifted the chain over her head and dropped the locket into the old solicitor's hand.

"It's been well-cared for all these years," he approved, looking it over. "A truly magnificent piece of the jeweller's craft by the late Mr. Cody. That man was a true artist," he added with a nod of his head. "I helped Samantha pick out the design, you know. Let me see if I remember ..." He fiddled with the locket a moment, then with an "Ah," he thumbed a catch along the side of the heart. The locket split into two faces, a glittering key in its center. "I'm afraid my fingers are not so dexterous as they once were — Miss Charles?" he asked, handing the opened locket back to her.

She took it and lifted the key out, staring at it in wonder. "And it opens this lock?" she asked, looking back at Page. He nodded. Smiling at Michael, she leaned over and inserted the key into the small lock dangling from the trunk. It went in easily and they all held their breaths — including Samantha — as she turned the key. A soft click was heard in the silence, and Emma removed the lock. She looked at Page, who had come around the desk and was now perched on the edge of the desk, watching the trunk intently.

"There's a small switch to the side of the catch — just press it with your thumb."

Emma did as she was told, and the catch sprang open. Her fingers were trembling as she lifted the trunk lid.

They all craned to peer inside the trunk, including Samantha. She had moved from Page's desk to sit on the arm of Michael's chair. Michael glanced at her curiously; she was tense and nervous as the faded cloth covering the contents of the trunk was lifted away. Beneath the cloth were carefully stacked papers, brittle with age, tied with discolored ribbons, once pink and blue and violet. Emma lifted these out carefully, handing them to Jameson Page.

"My. Love letters from Harrison to Samantha. She really meant it when she said that was the key to her heart," he murmured, glancing at the packet of letters in his hand. "Is there anything else?"

Sam nodded urgently. "Keep looking. There's more," she whispered to Michael.

Michael helped Emma extricate a medium-size chest and they placed it on the desk as Page moved out of the way. Emma nodded to Michael, and he unfastened the catch on the box, lifting the lid. Inside the chest were exquisitely-wrought necklaces, rings, and bracelets, tarnished after their years in the trunk.

"I think you just got wealthier, Miss Charles. I always wondered what happened to her jewel collection — I thought perhaps it had been stolen by a servant, but all her people were terribly loyal and they all knew they'd be taken care of in her will. A legend in your grandmother's lifetime, and more recently it has fallen to the status of mere Hollywood myth. She must have put them in here in trust for Lydia, your mother."

Sam whispered in Michael's ear, "I used to think of this as my hope chest. For Lydia. I never meant for the jewels to stay hidden for so long." She shook her head sadly.

Page held up a ruby necklace, the incandescent light from his desk lamp catching like fire in the perfectly cut gems. "And here are the papers authenticating the collection — provenance should you decide to sell the jewels." He set the necklace back in the case and looked expectantly into the trunk. "Anything else?"

Michael looked at Sam, who was still staring intently into the interior of the trunk. He turned his attention to the bottom of the trunk, brushing aside another stack of letters, and lifted out a large disk-shaped object. He dusted off the label in the center of the lid. "A film can — there are two others — the writing is faded ... 'Property of ...' uh, oh, yeah — 'Monumental Pictures'. There's a title, too —"

"'Delusion'?" Page said reverently, his eyes wide.

"'D ...' yeah — how did you know?" Michael asked, glancing up at Page. Then he looked at Sam, and she was smiling, her eyes closed.

"*Delusion* was Samantha's last picture. It was a brilliant piece of work, but controversial. It's a wonder it was made at all — the subject was sensitive, you see — Samantha played a woman suffering from mental illness, and the censors went mad over it. Sam wanted to do a dramatic film, on a serious subject. This was not your typical Hollywood treatment — it was more in the manner of an exposé. She found the screenwriter — a grave young man whose career went nowhere after this film — he was blacklisted, long before the McCarthy Era," he explained, nodding toward the tarnished silver can. "She financed the project herself. Even had it shot on an experimental film stock to ensure the best picture quality. But the studio wouldn't allow it to be released. Too controversial. Too dangerous, they said."

He shook his head sadly. "The studio controlled the distribution back then. They owned the movie houses, too. Sam was furious — she wanted the film shown. It was her best work, and it ... well, Samantha believed very strongly in it. Her mother had suffered from schizophrenia, you see. She died in a mental institution. But the studio killed any news about it. And then the film disappeared.

"I should have guessed Sam would have taken it. This must be the master negative — no, don't open it!" Page warned as Michael tried to pry the lid off. "We don't know what condition it's in ... a never-before-seen Samantha Marlowe film. *Delusion*! I must take it to a film restoration firm — if you will allow me, Miss Charles. Have it looked over in the proper environment, prints made ... My heavens," he breathed, his eyes fixed on the film can.

When Michael turned to look at Samantha, he saw her attention fixed on the film canister, too, a look of resolution and pride on her face. She lifted her eyes to look at Michael and smiled. "It's my best work — it should have been shown all over the country, made people face up to mental illness. But the studio was thinking of its wallet, not its conscience. Make sure it gets seen, Michael." With that, she faded from sight.

* * *

Sealed inside the film canisters and locked away in a trunk for almost 50 years, the experimental negative stock of *Delusion* had weathered the years better than many of her films which had been released and played over and over again on television. A watchable, if dull and scratchy, black and white print had been made from the negative in time for the retrospective. One scene had dissolved entirely, but it had not been a crucial one; another had been damaged, but was still somewhat watchable. The negative was then turned over to a premiere film restoration firm to undergo painstaking restoration for a general release the following year or

possibly later. The damaged material would be repaired and enhanced to the extent possible, and some of it could be rebuilt from the yellowed and brittle studio stills that had also been found in Samantha's trunk.

Page had come through on his promise of tickets, and Burton joined him and Emma at the premiere with Liz Carmeli on his arm. The discovery of not only the heir to the Marlowe fortune, but a previously unknown Samantha Marlowe film had brought the press out in droves. Hollywood's elite had clamored for tickets to the premiere of *Delusion*, and Page had finally had to change the venue of the retrospective from a small art movie house in Hollywood, to a restored old movie palace in downtown Los Angeles. The delay in schedule had allowed time to have a back-up print of *Delusion* made, in case anything went wrong with the first print. Hundreds of neon bulbs glittered and pulsed as Samantha's name was spelled out on the marquis. Liz goggled no less than did her three companions, as the best known names and faces in the film industry moved through the lobby to the reception down in the lower salon of the theater.

Considering that the entire affair had been thrown together in a matter of weeks, it was grand in the tradition of Hollywood's golden days. Champagne was served in crystal glasses by liveried waiters carrying silver trays, and *hors d'oeuvres* were served at tables lining the outer perimeter of the reception room. Famous people mingled all around them.

"Samantha would have been proud — look at this!" Page commented, beaming. "There's Robert Redford ... and look, Helen Hayes! Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy ... Angela Lansbury! Oh my — Elizabeth Taylor! I wish I had the nerve to ask for her autograph," Page said softly. "I've always had a sort of crush on her. Those lavender eyes ..." He sighed, still smiling. He looked at the young woman on his arm and shook his head. "But none of them — not even Miss Taylor — are as lovely as you are tonight, my dear," he told her.

Emma blushed furiously. She wore some of her grandmother's jewelry in honor of the occasion, and a simple but elegant black silk chemise evening gown. Her white-blonde hair was piled on her head in ringlets and tumbling curls, but she was clearly uncomfortable as the center of attention. Many of those famous personages had come by to pay their respects to Page and especially Emma, openly curious about Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter and heir. Page had presented Emma as though she were royalty, and several times during the reception, she'd had to fight down the urge to curtsey in response.

"I don't think I could ever get used to this," she breathed. "It's no wonder my mother ran away from it. It's horrific," she added, shaking her head. In fact, her whole body trembled slightly.

Page looked at her, startled. "You know, I never really thought about that. Lydia was a studious sort, happier with her books than being seen in public. She hated this sort of thing. Used to get sick before any public appearance — her coming out party was a total disaster. Her father couldn't understand — he was raised in the public eye, and his marriage to your grandmother ..." He shook his head. "I never realized. Poor Lydia." He took her hand in his and patted it gently. "One is never too old to learn, I suppose. The furor will die down shortly, I'm sure. Unless one does something to attract attention, the press these days loses interest quickly. I promise I'll help you return to your quiet life, Emma," he vowed.

"Oh, I didn't mean — well, yes, I suppose I did," she amended, chuckling softly. "I don't mind giving lectures at the university, but this," she gestured toward the glittering room and the famous people, all glancing surreptitiously toward her, "is just not for me." She reached out to touch Michael's arm. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful — I am very grateful. Just the other day I got a call from my great-aunt, my grandfather's sister. She's as rich as Croessus and doesn't want a dime from me — just a visit to Connecticut. That means more to me ... more than all this, certainly. But I think I'll be happier when people forget about me. It'll be easier to teach classes then, I'm sure!"

Liz smiled sympathetically. "Look, why don't we go on up to the theater — there's a private box for us in the balcony, yes?" she asked Page and he nodded. "We'll get settled in there to watch the movie, okay? Come on."

Emma breathed a sigh of relief and allowed herself to be led through the crowd by Liz, a veteran of many a crowded booking room.

Burton and Page watched them go, and then Page cleared his throat. "Well, they'll all be disappointed that she's slipped away, but I'm sure the film — and the notoriety — will suffice. Your young lady friend is a kind person, you know. And she certainly earned this evening as much as the rest of us, after all her hard work in tracking down Emma."

Michael nodded agreement. He and Liz had had a nice dinner a couple of weeks earlier in payment for her help, with dancing afterward, and confirmed that they enjoyed each other's company, but nothing more. His best friend, Annie, would have loved this, but Page was right — Liz had earned it.

"I suppose it's time for me to make a speech — why don't you join the young ladies, Detective?"

"If you're sure ..."

"I'm sure. Unlike Miss Charles, I enjoy the limelight. Remember? This is my moment of fame. The night I make Hollywood history. I shall enjoy it. You go on." Page walked stiffly but resolutely into the center of the room, picked up a spoon from the buffet table, and rang it against his glass for attention. All eyes turned toward him, and Michael slipped out the door to make his way to the private balcony.

* * *

Swing music from the forties played over the theater's speaker system, a jazzy number by the Glenn Miller Orchestra. The murmur of voices wafted up from the reception room below. As Michael made his way up the last flight of stairs to the private balcony area, he saw Samantha waiting for him at the top. She was dressed like something out of an Astaire-Rogers film, all frills and pastels with a long full skirt made of something shimmery and light. She was smiling, and held out her arms to him.

"Dance with me, Michael," she asked softly.

Ruth, that earlier shade who had also accurately advised Michael on his love life, had said exactly the same thing to him, at the dance at the elderly center after he'd found her will and resolved her unfinished business. He smiled at the memory, nodded and took Sam's hand in his, placing his other around her waist. On the downbeat, he swung her into the dance, and she threw her head back, laughing.

"It was the film all along, wasn't it — all those years. Emma was just a bonus," he said as they twirled.

She nodded. "But Emma is what brought me to you. The trigger, if you like. And now ... now she has what's hers, my film will finally be seen, and Jimmy ... Jimmy has his fame, his place in Hollywood history. Everybody wins."

"And you?" In unison, they dipped, and together they rose and spun in time to the music.

"And I ... get to go on. Finally. It's funny — I can't feel anything from your side anymore. Once you found Emma. Once you had the film. Now," she smiled, her expression nostalgic, "Now I can sense other things — perhaps it's the other side calling to me. I think I can sense Harry, and Lydia. They made up, I think. It was stupid, really. And I'll get to meet my son-in-law. I'll have a family, too." She released his hands and pirouetted away from him. "Thank you, Michael. For everything. Find that good woman. And be love happy always!" As she whirled, a cone of brilliant white light shot down from the ceiling and surrounded her. She waved, and then she and the light were gone.

"You, too, Sam," Michael whispered, and turned to open the balcony door just as the opening credits began to roll.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Kathryn A. Sullivan

Dr. Laura Wingate studied the wooden-handled pocket knife, looking at more than the bullet embedded in one side. Age should have lightened the wood to a grayish cast but instead it was no lighter a brown than the skin of her arm. She shifted the receiver to her right ear, wishing she had the person at the other end there before her. "From what you've told me, Mac, what you have here is an apport."

"A what?" demanded her caller.

Her dark eyes flashed with amusement as she shifted into lecture mode. "Apports are items that appear out of nowhere, usually during the use of psychic abilities. During the Edwarian and Victorian periods, they commonly appeared in association with psychic quests —"

She held the receiver away from her ear just as her associate, Professor J.J. Stillman, came through the doors to their office, briefcase in one hand and motorcycle helmet in the other. "Trouble?" he asked, wary concern crossing his boyish features.

Covering the mouthpiece, Laura used the receiver to point to the knife on the desktop before her. "Not yet, but I have a feeling there will be." Checking that her caller had stopped shouting, she returned the receiver to her ear. "MacGyver, I'm only telling you what I know. Are you on some sort of 'quest' that I should know about? Because if you are, I'd better send this back to you fast."

Across the room, J.J. placed his helmet atop a filing cabinet and continued on to his desk, pulling off his leather jacket on the way. He sorted through the correspondence that their teaching assistant had left atop it, only half listening to the one-sided conversation as he realized that Celia had opened his mail *again.*

"When are you going to be in this area? I'd really like to run some tests ... Okay, but if you get something else like this I want to know the second it appears, not a year or so after the fact!"

Adjusting his tie, J.J. scanned a "to all faculty" notice and snorted softly. "Typical."

"What's 'typical' this time?" Laura asked.

He looked up and, seeing that she had finished her phone conversation, waved the memo at her. "Dean Fleming is so politely reminding everyone that smoking is allowed only in offices. Which is a great way to irritate people, rather than simply coming out and asking everyone to be on the alert for a possible firebug."

"Is that what he's doing?" Laura began clipping her large ornate earrings — removed for the phone call — back on. "Are you analyzing the dean or just catching on to how universities communicate internally?"

He made a face at her reminder of how confusing university procedures still were to him, even after three years on the faculty. "Two fires in a row are more than just a coincidence."

"More a nuisance, like the bomb threats before finals last year." She smiled and spread her hands at his expression. "C'mon, J.J. So, twice now, someone has shoved papers under an office door and set them on fire. Even the fire department wouldn't consider that a serious problem. Especially when they happened over a month apart. Larry's just overreacting, as usual." She thought a moment, then sorted through her stack of mail. "And *that* explains why all department chairs have this strange memo about teaching assistants." The chair of the Parapsychology Department frowned at the offending piece of paper. "'Be aware of odd behavior?'" She tossed it in the recycle bin.

"She's opening my mail again," J.J. offered as evidence.

"That's not odd; Celia just thinks you're disorganized."

"She also thinks I should have grades posted the same day the papers are due," J.J. muttered. "That reminds me." He dug through the stack of brightly colored folders arranged on his desk and excavated an orange one. "I wanted you to see this report one of my students in the Intro class turned in."

"What's it about?" Laura stared dubiously at the folder he placed in her hand but began to flip through the pages.

"He was writing about the psychic traces of elements, such as water, minerals ..."

"Or fire?" Laura looked up at him. "He thinks it's possible to dowse for fire?"

"*Is* it possible?" He glanced at his watch, then went back to his desk to gather what he needed for his next class. "I mean, the technology exists to detect sources of heat —"

"More so than detecting water or copper," Laura completed. She frowned thoughtfully at the paper as he started loading the stack of folders into his briefcase. "You're thinking extra credit assignment? Sounds like a good idea." She paused, watching him curiously. "But what do you need my opinion for? Are you practicing psychiatry on the side again?"

J.J. straightened, closing his briefcase, and grinned sheepishly at her. "Maybe. I just wanted to check before he asked — if he did decide to try this as an extra credit assignment."

"Proving it impossible would be good for extra credit, too. Why must fire dowsing be possible for —" she checked the name inside the folder, "— Corey Kertiz?"

J.J. ran a hand through his dark hair. "He's a good kid — bright, asks a lot of intelligent questions in class, and seems very interested in the material."

"And —" Laura prodded, propping her chin on her hand.

He sighed, unable to put into words what had struck him about the freshman other than the obvious. "He's got a burn scar right about here," he said, fingering the right side of his jaw. "If it was a traumatic enough episode he could have a mild obsession about the cause —"

"And you didn't want to add to it," Laura finished with a slight nod.

"Yeah," J.J. agreed softly. He checked his watch and started out the door for his Introduction to Parapsychology class.

"J.J.," Laura called.

Turning, he saw the orange folder in her hand and started back across the room to retrieve it. "Let me know how the extra credit project turns out," Laura commented. "It could be an interesting paper."

* * *

A hiss came from the grayness about him, growing into a crackle that sounded almost like laughter. He whirled to face the sound and could almost see a glow in the distance, a glow that had a sensation of heat about it.

He started at a blast of sound from a stereo down the hall and his eyes focused on the words in the open book propped in his line of sight. "'Clear your mind of all outside disturbances.' Riight."

He began to get up from the desk when he saw what was on the desk top. The pen in his right hand clattered to the floor as he fell back into the chair, conscious only of the crackling laughter in his mind.

* * *

"Professor Wingate?" The tall student standing hesitantly in the doorway looked too young to be anything but a freshman, Laura decided. The short fringe of dreadlocks around the top of his head bobbed as he glanced nervously about the large office. "Professor Stillman told me to meet him here." An old burn scar stood out lividly against his dark skin, reminding her of something J.J. had said a few days ago.

"Come on in and sit down, then," she welcomed. "He should be back in a moment."

She turned back to her computer screen but kept aware of the student's movements. Sometimes you could tell which students would decide to major in Parapsychology just from their reactions to the department office. He seemed interested in the masks and artifacts on the shelving inside the entrance, but seemed to do a doubletake when he turned to his left and saw all the high tech electronic equipment near J.J.'s workspace.

"Seismograph?" he muttered softly, the puzzlement in his voice louder than his words. "And that can't be a — no, can't be —"

Laura smiled slightly at the screen. Definitely a freshman, which was probably why she still couldn't place him. J.J. handled all the freshman classes this fall semester.

She closed the file and logged out of the computer. The student had followed the line of equipment shelves down the few steps to the lower center of the room. He dropped his backpack onto the nearer of the two couches and glanced toward the window of the darkened sleep lab. The burn scar along his right jaw was very noticeable from where she sat, and the memory of her conversation with J.J. suddenly clicked. "Extra credit assignment?" she asked.

He shrugged, more intent on the sleep lab's contents. "Maybe."

She rose and started down the steps from her workspace. "You're Corey Kertiz, aren't you? Dr. Stillman showed me your paper. That was an interesting theory of yours. I liked the way you mentioned that dowsing for fire could be useful for detecting forest fires or underground mine fires."

The thin student tensed. "It's ... not really a theory," he said softly. "I can —"

"Sharon's experiment is okay," J.J. announced as he came through the doors. "The lab did have some smoke damage, but the animals are all right."

"What was the cause of the fire this time?" Laura glanced aside when the student made a faint sound. "There was a fire last night," she explained.

"Last night?" The student took three steps back and dropped onto the couch. "A fire?" His skin had paled to almost to the shade of her complexion.

"Oh, hi, Corey." J.J. put his briefcase on his desk and started down the steps. "Someone put a box of papers outside the door to a lab further down the hall from our lab and set it on fire. I'm just glad it was the labs in the Medical building and not this one, the Med has better ventilation."

Laura kept most of her attention on the student. If it was possible for someone to be both upset and relieved at the same time, then that was how she would describe his expression. "Do they know what time this happened, J.J.?"

"Not long after ten — which means someone from the night classes could have set it and left."

"Corey here was just telling me that he could sense fires," Laura said, waiting for the student's reaction. "Did you sense the one last night, Corey?"

"How did you know —" Corey began just as J.J. exclaimed "He can?" J.J. turned excitedly to the student as Corey looked wildly at her. "Did you read that chapter on meditation in the book I loaned you?"

"But I —" Disbelief in his eyes, Corey turned away from staring at Laura to answer his instructor. "I was reading it last night and trying one of the methods when I — I *must* have sensed it last night, then."

"Sensed it how?" J.J. asked, sitting on the edge of the opposite couch.

"I — heard it. I've always heard fire, even before —" His hand half raised toward the scar, and J.J. nodded encouragingly. "But this time it was different."

"How so?" Laura queried, settling on the arm of the sofa near J.J.
Corey pulled a folder out of his backpack and held it out to her. Laura recognized the standard university folder usually distributed to freshmen during the orientation tours. The back cover with the campus map was uppermost and after a moment's study, Laura noticed the black circle within the Medical Building, right about where the second floor labs would be. "I don't even remember drawing it," Corey said nervously as she passed the folder on to J.J. "I was practicing what the book said to do ... then I got distracted. I thought the exercise didn't work, but when I looked down ... it —" he pointed at the mark, "— was there and the pen was in my hand."

"You've never done anything like this before?" J.J. pursued, handing the folder back to Corey.

The freshman shrugged. "I've always been aware when fire was nearby — the stove when I was in the kitchen — my parents finally gave up and got an electric one — the burners in Chemistry lab when I was in high school — but I was in my dorm room last night. Nowhere near the labs! I've *never* heard any fire that far away before, and I've certainly never been marking any maps." He shook his head. "This is pretty weird even for me."

"Laura, do you think we can test this?"

"I don't see why not," she replied, mentally reviewing the supplies they had on hand. "We still have the equipment we used on the Fullman case. Celia's just about done with the last project you gave her —" she raised her eyebrows at J.J. as he opened his mouth, so he quickly closed it and tried to look long-suffering, "— so she can give us a hand as well." She turned to the increasingly nervous student. "Do you want to try, Corey?"

Corey glanced at the array of electronic equipment near J.J.'s workspace and J.J. said hurriedly, "It won't hurt, and we can pay for your time —"

"J.J., the budget," Laura warned.

"— some of your time. And you'll have additional material for your extra credit paper."

The student was frightened as well as nervous, Laura realized. She remembered how Becky Fullman had described her fire-detecting experiences. "You said you 'heard' the fire, Corey? What does it sound like?"

"Like laughter." Corey looked straight at her. "Like it's laughing at me." He absently fingered the scar on his face. Suddenly a look of incipient panic filled his eyes. "You've got to help me. It's coming for me."

"You feel you're in danger?" she asked calmly. She pitched her voice to its most soothing timbre in an effort to stem the fear that was visibly rising in Corey. She avoided looking at J.J. beside her, but wondered why he was letting her do the talking. This conversation had moved out of parapsychology and into his former field, yet he was taking only a passive role in the exchange. Not like him at all.

The student shook his head. "Not ... now. Not right away. I was five when this —" he gestured at the scar, "— happened. It's been laughing at me ever since, just letting me know it's around." Taking a deep breath, Corey rose and walked over to the sleep lab. From his body language, the edge of the panic seemed dulled now, but still lurking in the background. Laura watched his reflection in the darkened window and saw his eyes widen fractionally, as though some shocking image had suddenly come into his field of vision. Corey backed up, shaking his head. "I don't know. I — I've got to get to class." He picked up his backpack and hurried out the doors, brushing past a young woman with short brown hair and an equally short dress in the doorway.

* * *

He hurried down the stairs and out the building, then stopped and took a deep ragged breath, willing the images in his head to disappear. He knew what was happening — he was taking Psychology 102 — and he was not going to panic. Those half-forgotten memories — images of smoke and flames, the sensation of heat against his face that would later turn into searing pain, the shrill pitch of children's screams — had been triggered by his new interest in analyzing his ability to sense fire. The fact that they had started to appear during his talk with the professors and grown more vivid the longer he had talked was not due to "fire" trying to frighten him, but simply as a result of his thinking about when and how his ability worked.

He glanced up at the Life Sciences building. He should go back, now, and schedule a time for the tests they wanted to run. He wanted to understand this ability. To think that he had a psychic ability, something to be proud of! He shouldn't be frightened by childhood memories! "*Show me, coz,*" a voice from his memory whispered, followed by screams. Shaking his head, he glanced at his watch and decided to wait until after his next class.

* * *

The brunette straightened the stack of mail in her hands and glanced down the corridor at the retreating back of the black student. "What's with him?"

"Morning, Celia," Laura greeted absently, then turned towards J.J. "Think he'll be back?"

J.J. ran a hand through his brown hair. "Can't tell. I'm glad you picked up the questioning, though — as his teacher, I can't afford to scare him out of the classroom."

"So you figured any negative associations were safer made with me." Laura grinned twistedly. "Thanks."

J.J. nodded in agreement, too distracted to notice the sarcasm. "He's a good kid. And he seems genuinely interested." He rose and went toward his desk, pointedly removing one letter from Celia's grasp on the way. "Just in case, I think I want to check on Becky's schedule. Talking to her might help him."

"*Who* him?" Celia asked.

Laura only waved at her to be quiet. "Good idea. And let her Chief know what we're doing as well."

"What *are* we doing?" Celia demanded. "Come on, guys — what are we talking about here?" She paused and her green eyes blazed with a new thought. "*Field work?* Look, you promised I'd have a chance —"

Laura merely glanced at their teaching assistant and continued, "I don't want him to hear a garbled version third-hand. Especially with a firebug loose on the campus. You remember how Becky's co-workers felt about her."

"How?" the confused T.A. practically wailed.

J.J. nodded in agreement. "That she was setting the fires and only claiming to sense them." He stopped and looked at Laura.

Laura chewed her lip as her eyes darted to the doors. "J.J., you don't think —"

Celia followed her gaze. "Him? He can sense fires? You don't think he's responsible for the ones lately, do you? Like that kid in *Firestarter?*" She finally gained the attention of both professors. "No, of course not," she faltered under their combined stare. "I mean, why draw attention to himself by coming in here if he was?"

"Exactly," Laura affirmed.

J.J. frowned. "Unless he's not conscious that he's the cause."

"J.J.!" Laura protested.

"Unconscious mental projection, like in the Havers case," J.J. mused. He caught sight of Laura's expression. "Look, the map frightened him enough to come to us, but there's something else bothering him about the fire besides just being able to sense it. The way he kept reaching toward his scar and the way he described what he heard ..."

"That it was coming for him," Laura added pensively. "So, the sooner we get the Chief on our side, the better." Rising to her feet, she started up the steps to her own phone.

Celia shook her head and went toward Laura's desk, glancing through the stack of mail as she walked.

J.J. looked blankly at his colleague. "Our side?"

Laura picked up the receiver and began pressing buttons. "Who better than the Chief of the Fire Department to defend us against the dean, once he gets wind of this? You know how Larry overreacts."

Celia frowned at an "to all faculty" notice. "Did you know that Maintenance has received a memo about leaving around cleaning materials? We're supposed to report any unlocked janitor supply closets."

J.J. and Laura exchanged glances. "I'll phone Becky," J.J. repeated.

* * *

"Is everything all right with your Intro class, J.J.?" Laura asked from across the office late one afternoon.

J.J. sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I know what you're asking. Yes, Corey has been in class, and, no, he hasn't said a word about coming in. He hasn't said a word about anything! He just shows up for class and doesn't wait around after."

"It's just that it's been over a week since he was here." Laura finished writing her comments on the student paper before her, closed the folder, and placed it atop a growing stack.

"A week and a half," J.J. corrected. He leaned forward and opened a folder from his own stack of student papers.

"Just call me a miracle-worker," Celia announced as she entered the office. "I'm not up to Scotty's standards yet, but I'm getting close."

Laura leaned back in her chair with a faint chuckle. "Modesty, Celia? What have you been up to?"

"And where's the interlibrary loan book you went to pick up?" J.J. asked, eying the few sheets of paper she held.

Celia regarded him loftily. "You requested it for Sharon; I dropped it off with Sharon. *This* — " she waved the loose sheets of paper — "represents several hours of patient, diligent hard work —"

"What have you been up to, Celia?" Laura repeated.

Celia beamed. "Well," she began, starting slowly down the steps to the center of the room and taking center stage, "I noticed you both have been concerned about that freshman —"

"Corey," J.J. said wearily. "What did you do, Celia?"

"— and, knowing how you feel about hacking into student records —"

Laura straightened. "Celia, you didn't!"

Celia held up her hand. "I didn't. I just spent some time on the newspaper indexes and looked for fires involving children about thirteen years ago. And I found him." She handed the pages to Laura with a flourish.

"Celia, you're brilliant," Laura said, looking at their T.A. in amazement.

"I know." Celia smiled smugly at J.J.

"Don't encourage her, Laura."

"*Dis*couraging her has never worked," Laura reminded him absently, scanning the photocopied sheets. "Might as well — J.J., you were right about the fire. The newspaper reports that he was visiting his cousins. The police suspected that one of the boys was playing with matches. Both of his cousins and his aunt were killed in the fire, but the firefighters saved Corey."

"The very last article is about his time in the hospital," Celia added helpfully. "The staff all liked him."

Laura frowned thoughtfully and handed the articles to J.J. as he neared her desk. "Nothing there to explain why he hasn't come in."

"Guilt," Celia pronounced airily. "The survivor syndrome. He survived; they didn't. Or guilt because he was the one playing with matches."

"Thank you, 'Dr.' Powell," J.J. said sarcastically, studying the pages.

"Makes you wonder who's the psychiatrist," Laura quipped softly for her colleague's ears. He glanced at her and shook his head at her smile.

"I could be right," Celia persisted.

"J.J.?"

He grimaced. "She could have a point."

"Yes!" Celia crowed.

"Talking about his ability might have triggered flashbacks," J.J. continued. "He's been looking on edge. I'll make certain to corner him after class tomorrow." He glanced at their T.A. and sighed. "And I'll need your help."

* * *

"*Show me, coz,*" the voice whispered. "*Find it.*"

Corey shoved the memory to the back of his mind and concentrated on finding a comfortable place to study. The recurring memories had invaded his dreams now, and his roommate was not taking the disturbances the resulting nightmares caused well. He was glad the buildings opened an hour before the 8:00 classes; at this rate he'd be putting in a lot of study time.

His pace slowed as he neared a closed classroom door. A faint crackling filled his mind as he looked at the door, a sound that became more like laughter the longer he stood. He could almost imagine that he could see smoke seeping out from under that door.
"You, there!" a sharp voice intruded. Corey could not move; it was vital that he stay and listen to the laughter. The voice came closer. "What are you doing — Fire! Go set off the alarm! Fire!"

* * *

"According to the professor," Celia explained, with a glance aside at the security officer at the reception desk, "he just stood there, staring at the door. Security took him out when they evacuated the building, but he just kept staring at nothing until the fire was put out."

"And then he called you," J.J. said as he handed Laura a cup of coffee.

"He called the office," Celia corrected him. "*I* was there. I called as soon as I could."

"Can we talk to him?" Laura asked.

Celia nodded. "They're waiting for you. I explained how he's working with us —" J.J. sputtered on his coffee, "— and I've almost got them convinced to release him if we take responsibility."

"Oh, we'll take responsibility," Laura said, a dangerous edge to her voice. "*If* he promises to work with us. It's time we got to the bottom of this."

* * *

"Each burner will be triggered randomly," Laura explained as Celia attached electrodes to Corey's temples. She glanced past the students to the window of the sleep lab. In the main office, J.J. was setting the last wire basket over the fifth of the evenly spaced burners. He nodded behind Corey's back and Laura returned her attention to the medical readouts console before her and the student seated in front of it. "All you'll have to do is see if you can tell us which one."

Corey squirmed uncomfortably in the chair, not looking at the diagram of the five burners on the tabletop before him. "How? I told you, I only hear it."

J.J., about to settle himself at the burner controls out of Corey's vision, rose and gestured to Celia to take his place. As the teaching assistant did so, J.J. pulled up a chair opposite Corey. "Just see if you can, Corey." He inclined his head to Celia.

Flames sprang up out of the third burner. There was no sound of the flames or the gas from the burner inside the sleep lab, but Corey had jumped at the very instant the flames had appeared. Laura made note of that as well as the intense *listening* expression on his face.

"It's right behind me," he said slowly. "I think, that one." He pointed to the second square on the paper before him.

Laura glanced at Celia. The teaching assistant nodded and shut off the burner, then turned on another.

Corey jumped again as flames shot up from the fifth burner. He took a deep breath. "That one," he repeated, now pointing to the fifth square.

They ran through several more tries with mixed success. "How are you holding up, Corey?" Laura asked after two misses in a row. Each attempt seemed to increase the student's nervousness. Perspiration now stood out on his brow and it looked to her as if only the electrodes were keeping him in the chair. "What does the fire sound like now?"

"Still ..." Corey took a deep breath, "laughing. It sounds like it's coming closer. It's not coming closer, is it?"

"No," J.J. said firmly. "No, it's not moving, Corey. Okay, it's time to try something different. Corey, I want you to remember the meditation exercise you tried. What did you do?"

Corey thought a moment. "Cleared my mind of all outside distractions. And then I was to focus on a distant point, but I was in my dorm room, so I just stared out the window."

"Good. Nice and basic." J.J. held his hand up, displaying a ring with a colorless stone. "Now, Corey, I want you to focus on this. And I want you to tell yourself that when you hear laughter, it is an outside distraction. You are not going to hear it."

"But I hear it in my mind."

"You are not going to hear it. You will only hear my voice. Focus on the ring. Clear your mind."

Corey shrugged and obediently stared at the ring. J.J. nodded, and Laura gestured to Celia. Flames leaped from the second burner.

"Now, Corey," J.J. instructed slowly. "Point to the fire."

The student's hand slowly stirred and pointed at the second square.

Celia turned off the second burner and turned on the first.

"Again, Corey."

The finger moved from the second square to the first.

"Again."

The door to the outside corridor opened and a blonde woman in a dark blue uniform glanced inside. Laura gestured to her to take a chair and she entered, followed by a older black man. The gold braid on his uniform was a very welcome sight to Laura. They settled down to watch the test in silence.

J.J. nodded to the new arrivals as Celia continued to change burners. "Again, Corey."

Corey, his attention still on the ring, calmly pointed to the correct square.

* * *

After they had completed the same number of attempts as they had in the first trial, J.J. lowered his hand. The student blinked, his eyes falling on the office clock — more than half an hour had passed while he'd remained in the trance — unafraid of fire!

"How do you feel, Corey?" Laura asked as J.J. massaged his hand to restore circulation.

"Fine." Corey thought a moment, then suddenly smiled. "I feel fine." He laughed. "That was so *easy*. I just *knew* where the fire was."

J.J. smiled as he rose to his feet. "You did fine, Corey." He started to remove the electrodes, then stopped as the student suddenly jumped. "Corey?"

"J.J., look at the readings!" Laura exclaimed.

Corey tried not to panic as crackling laughter rose about him. He couldn't focus his thoughts, there was too much sound — "No! Give him a *city* map!" he heard a woman's voice snarl.

The crackling retreated and the lab returned around him. A woman with shoulder-length blonde hair was holding a city map under his hand. Her dark blue uniform seemed very familiar. Her blue eyes seemed to look through him, then she nodded at him and turned toward a similarly dressed man hurriedly dialing a phone. "I'd say yes; wouldn't you, Chief?"

The man looked over the top of his glasses at her, then spoke into the phone. "This is the Chief. Has a fire been reported? Where?"
Feeling confused, Corey looked for the professors and found Professor Stillman at his side. "Are you back with us now, Corey?"

"I think so. Who are these two?"

"No, that's not — what?" The man at the phone looked surprised. "When?"

The woman turned back to him. "That's the Chief; I'm Becky Fullman. We've got a lot in common, you and I." She looked closely at him. "You still hear it, don't you?"

Corey glanced at Professor Stillman for support, then nodded. "Yeah. It's faint, but still there. How did you know?"

"I told you, we've got a lot in common. I used to be able to detect fires, too. Now I just put them out."

Corey blinked as the crackling laughter in his mind seemed to hesitate. His mind filled with half-remembered images: flames and smoke around him and a bulky black sleeve, beaded with moisture, wrapped about him, carrying him; a hospital bed and a hand resting on his, a sleeve in dark blue —

The Chief put down the receiver. "Confirmed. The call came in while I was on the phone." He looked at Corey over the top of his glasses. "How did you know?"

"I ... don't know. I just ..." Corey's voice died away as he took a close look at the map. He'd never heard fire *that* far away before!

"Never mind," the Chief dismissed the question. "You probably can't explain it any more than Fullman could. Fullman, I'm assigning you as liaison to the professors."

"Chief —" the woman started, then sighed. "Yes, Chief." She looked at Professor Stillman, then smiled a small smile at Corey. "Someone's got to protect you from the shrink, here." But from the wink Professor Stillman gave him as he removed the electrodes Corey knew she and the professor were friends.

"Actually, Chief," Professor Wingate said, leaning against a counter, "we're rather counting on you to protect us."

"Oh?" The tall man glanced at her. "From what?"

She grinned twistedly and nodded toward the door to the hallway. A half second later the door opened. "Wingate." Immediately behind the voice followed an imposing black man in an expensive suit.

"Dean Fleming," Professor Wingate greeted lightly. "We were expecting you."

"Luckily," Professor Stillman said softly to Becky, "you and the Chief arrived first." Corey looked away from the dean to glance at him and the professor smiled faintly. "Don't let him get to you; Laura and I will handle it." He rested his hand on Corey's shoulder, then rose to join his colleague.

A second man had entered almost on the heels of the first, and Corey recognized the professor who had spoken to him that morning. Although most of Corey's attention had been on the fire at the time, the stocky balding white man had made an unforgettable impression.

The dean continued as if Professor Wingate had not spoken, a faint accent of Jamaica in his phrases, "I heard Security caught the arsonist and you made them release him into your custody." He turned brusquely toward the Chief. "There was no need for Professor Wingate to involve you; campus security can handle the matter."

"I'm no —" Corey started indignantly, beginning to rise to his feet.

"Sit," Celia ordered firmly but quietly, moving quickly to his side and resting her hand on his shoulder to keep him in place. "Trust me; Dr. Wingate has things planned."

"I think you heard wrong, Fleming," the Chief countered swiftly. "This young man isn't a suspect — he's helping us with the investigation."

"I like your Chief," Celia murmured to Becky.

The blonde firefighter's attention was on her Chief, but Corey could see the pride in the small smile that was her answer to the comment.

"It's because of Corey that the fire this morning was caught before it could do any damage," Professor Wingate chimed in. "Isn't that so, Professor Sanders?"

"I ..." Sanders started, taken aback, and Corey grimaced, recognizing the type. The professor's gaze fell on Corey, and his confusion vanished. Sander's eyes narrowed, his lips pursing in distaste. "He's the one, Dean," he said, pointing. "I found him outside the classroom. Just standing there, staring at nothing. There's no reason why he should have been there. He *must* have started the fire and then waited to see what happened."

"Waiting right outside the door?" Professor Stillman amplified skeptically. He shook his head. "Does that fit the profile of a typical arsonist, Chief?"

"No, sir," the firefighter disagreed. "Frequently arsonists will hang around to see the results of their handiwork, but they usually lose themselves in the crowd to do so."

"And there was no crowd at the time, was there? It also doesn't fit the profile of the campus firebug," Professor Stillman continued.

"But he was right outside the door," Sanders insisted.

"Of course he was," Professor Wingate agreed. "He could sense the fire."

The Dean shook his head. "Is this another of your so-called —"

"What my colleague means," Professor Stillman inserted hurriedly as Professor Wingate opened her mouth, "is that Mr. Kertiz can detect the presence of fire." He gestured at the wire baskets visible in the office. "We just finished giving a demonstration to the Chief, here."

"Oh, really," Sanders sneered. His expression indicated that he thought they all belonged in padded rooms. Celia's grip tightened on Corey's shoulder and he looked up indignantly at her. She grimaced in the man's direction, but released his shoulder.

The Chief's expression was more controlled than Celia's. "Yes, really. And I was most impressed." He turned to the dean. "You'd be wise to cooperate, Fleming. Considering all the false alarms that get turned in from the dormitories, you're lucky I'm willing to listen."

Suddenly a faint crackling laughed softly, and Corey looked around wildly. "Fire! It's in here!" he shouted, springing to his feet. He turned to Becky, who had stood when he had, and grabbed her arm. The images returned — flames and smoke and a face in an oxygen mask — but the laughter continued. "It's in here!"

"Put out that lighter, Sanders!" Professor Stillman ordered angrily.

Sanders flinched, bringing his lighter out from behind his back into Corey's view.

Corey relaxed and released the firefighter. "Sorry," he murmured.
"It's okay," she told him. "I understand."

"It's an act," Sanders protested, looking from the dean to the Chief and the professors.

"If it is, it's a very good one," the Chief said dangerously, looking over his glasses at the agitated professor. "Especially considering he detected a fire earlier halfway across the city *before* the alarm was called. A fire there is no chance he could have set, I might add." He turned to the dean. "I'm convinced he's for real, Fleming. I'm convinced enough that Fullman will be staying here to relay any information the professors and this young man are able to find. *And* I'll be informing the president of this university about this assignment."

"It has to be an act!" Sanders repeated. "I mean — just look at him!"

The Chief, the Dean and Professor Wingate looked at Sanders instead. Corey heard a muffled noise beside him and looked to find that Celia had clapped her hands over her mouth.

The Chief turned to Professor Stillman. "You mentioned you had a profile of the campus arsonist?"

Stillman shrugged. "Just a small collection of notes."

"Good. Fullman can check it against what we have on file." He nodded to Professor Wingate. "Thank you, professors. A most impressive demonstration." He turned to Corey. "I'll be expecting to hear more from you. That's quite a useful talent you have." He nodded at Fleming on his way out the door.

Dean Fleming looked at the Chief's departing back, then turned to Sanders. "Professor, I think we need to have a talk."

* * *

"His fear gets in the way," Laura said later, leaning forward on the edge of the wicker chair. "You saw the results." She studied her audience — J.J. leaning on the table of wire baskets and Becky seated on one of the office couches — and saw that the firefighter did not understand. "You came in during the second part of the test, Becky. He was highly accurate with meditation, but before that he could only tell *when* there was a fire." She shook her head.

"He wasn't so precise as to where."

The firefighter glanced at the baskets. "Sounds like he was better than I was when you tried this with me."

"Different abilities," J.J. commented. "Corey said that he's always been able to sense fire. Have you sensed any since — "

"Since I talked with my father's ghost?" She shook her head. "No. And I'm glad of it. It just got in the way of doing my job. Which I should be doing now," she complained, rising to her feet, "instead of sitting around here talking with you."

"Your job includes stopping arsonists, doesn't it?" J.J. countered.
She sat down again. "What have you got?"

He glanced at Laura, then went to a back corner of the office and began pulling out a display stand with a calendar and maps.

"J.J.," Becky interrupted, regarding his 'small collection of notes' with a mixture of curiosity and dismay, "how long will Celia and Corey be at the library?"

J.J. shrugged. "Corey's extra credit assignment is to write on how what he does differs from regular dowsing. Celia only has to get him started on doing the research, but with a new victim to listen to her, there's no telling," he added with a grin.

"And then she's to show him how to use our data base of paranormal reports here." Laura glanced at the door as if expecting the students to enter, then turned back to Becky. "Why?"

Becky glanced warily between them. "You said you wanted my help with Corey. Doing what?"

J.J. straightened. "He trusts you, Becky. Talk to him, get him to talk out what happened to him when he got the scar, what is happening to him now."

"Me? I'm no shrink."

"But you've gone through what he's going through now," Laura pointed out. "He needs that."

"You had Cap and the Chief to believe in you," J.J. added. "He's got you."

"And you two," Becky protested.

"We're his teachers. You're an outsider. He trusts you more." J.J. studied her. "It must be the uniform. Probably has something to do with how he got that scar."

Becky grimaced. "Great. So I get him to confide in me. Then what?"

J.J. looked at Laura in confusion. "Then nothing. Just be his friend. He needs someone who understands."

"Well!" Becky leaned back on the couch, clearly surprised and relieved. She straightened. "And what if he turns out to be the torch?"

J.J. grinned at her. "Not possible."

"He doesn't fit the profile?" Becky persisted.

"He doesn't fit the times." J.J. pointed to the first of several red X's on the large calendar. "Look, the first fire was in mid August. Corey's a freshman; he wasn't on campus until school started in September."

"Uh, J.J.?" Laura said hesitantly. "That was the week of freshmen orientation. Corey's got one of the folders they distributed then; he *could* have been on campus."

"Oh." J.J. stared at the calendar. "Freshman orientation is in August?"

"Has been for years. You complain every time about falling over the parents that week." She paused, looking closely at the calendar. "J.J., did you notice that the first two fires were just exactly a month apart? And the one the night before Corey first stopped in was two weeks after the second fire?"

"And the fourth fire was two weeks after the third. So now it's every other week." He glanced at Laura.

"The next change is every other day," Becky added, voicing what he had left unsaid, "assuming your arsonist follows this pattern. What else makes up the pattern?"

J.J. indicated the campus map tacked beside the calendar. "The first two fires were both in the Life Sciences building —"

"That's the one we're in?" Becky interrupted.

J.J. nodded. "The third was in Medical, over here —" he pointed, "— and the fourth was back in Life Sciences. The combustibles were already at the scene — papers under a door, paper recycling bins — nothing brought in. Fires have been set outside two offices and a lab and now inside a classroom."

"Which suggests someone without keys to the buildings, like a student." Laura paused. "But then why not the dorms or the gym?"

"Too many people about," J.J. argued. "Anyway, the office fires suggest a grudge."

Laura inclined her head in agreement. "Any links between the owners of the offices and who usually teaches in that classroom or lab?"

"Not this semester." J.J. frowned. "I'll have to check with the dean's office for last year and previous."

"Registrar's Office," Laura corrected him. She eyed Becky speculatively. "You know, it might help to have Security's reports on the fires as well. And they might talk more to an official investigator."

Becky agreed. "I'm on it."

"Done!" Laura announced. "But bring Celia along. You might need her help — for translation purposes, if nothing else." She glanced at her colleague. "It's taken years for J.J. to understand how to decipher university records."

J.J. made a face at her.

* * *

"Professor Wingate!" Celia stormed into the office, trailed by a sullen-faced Corey. She took one look at the empty desks, muttering "Never around when you need them," under her breath, then caught sight of Becky studying the charts in the back of the office. "You'll do! Would you please explain to — " She looked behind her, saw she was minus one shadow and returned to the doorway.

Becky stared curiously after her. "What's going on?" she asked Corey as he carried a load of books down the steps.

He grimaced and shook his head, his fringe of dreadlocks bobbing.

Celia returned with a muscular young man in tow. "There, you see? She's from the fire department. And *you* think you could do a better job?"

"Look, I told you, it's not my idea —"

Celia turned to Becky. "They've had Campus Security following us!"

The firefighter studied the embarrassed young man, who appeared to be only slightly older than Corey. "*This* is Campus Security? A student?"

"Student trainee. I'm majoring in law enforcement and —"

"Save it for the walk."

"Huh?"

"I want to talk to your supervisors," Becky informed him. "You're going to take me to them."

"But I can't leave —"

Becky pulled out her identification and showed it to him. "This is an official investigation. Your supervisors should have heard from Dean Fleming and your university president by now about it and if they haven't, they will hear about it from me." She pointed toward a phone. "Call them. I want to see all the records on this case and they had better be ready as soon as we get there."

"Yes, sir! Uh, ma'am." Wide-eyed, he hurried to the phone and began dialing.

Shaking her head, Becky turned to Celia. "I'll handle this. Laura wanted you to help me get some reports from Security —"

"Say no more. I can catch up with you at Security. Corey here just needs a few instructions on the data base commands and that should take all of five minutes. Aye, Mr. LaForge?"

Corey grinned and seated himself at Laura's terminal. "Aye, aye, Mr. Scott."

* * *

"It took a bit of digging," J.J. explained, pausing to snag a pea pod with his chopsticks, "but I finally managed to match the offices, the lab and the classroom." He waited a moment. "I had to go back four years," he added, prodding for a reaction.

"Dining in?" Becky stood in the office doorway and eyed the numerous small white cartons of takeout Chinese food.

"We get more done this way." Laura gestured with her chopsticks as Becky weaved her way amid suitcases, backpacks and stacks of books inside the doors to reach the steps. "We got you some sesame chicken. Extra rice is over by Corey. So're the forks. J.J. just found a possible victim. So, who did you go back four years to find, J.J.?"

"Dr. Jacob Phillips. He hasn't used the lab in four years, since he changed some of his classes. And four years ago that second office was his T.A.'s."

"His teaching assistant had her own office?" Celia demanded indignantly.

"Jake?" Laura protested. "Why would anyone pick on Jake?"

J.J. shrugged. "We'll just ask him."

"That's going to be a bit difficult, J.J. Jake's on sabbatical this year." Laura glanced at the large marked calendar. "He should be in Amsterdam right now."

"He's not even on campus?" Becky asked, looking up from her carton.

"Don't look so disappointed, J.J.," Laura said. "That just proves the firebug isn't someone from the university. Everyone here — except you, J.J. — knows Jake's gone all year. Did you find out anything interesting, Becky?"

"Security had a bit more of the pattern. Each of the four fires have been set either in the early morning or late evening. They had lists of names and descriptions of everyone they saw in the areas at the times of the fires — no matches. They did have one interesting note and I decided to check our records back at the station, otherwise I would have been back sooner." She put down her box and retrieved her notebook, flipping quickly through the pages. "Security had a note on an off-campus fire in July, at the home of a —" she paused and looked again at the name, "— Professor Jacob Phillips."

"When in July?" J.J. hurried to the calendar.

"The 18th." She went on as J.J. added an 'X' to the calendar.

"The neighbors spotted the fire before it did too much damage, and the police department was alerted to make additional sweeps since the professor was going to be out of town for awhile."

"Exactly one month before the fires started on campus," J.J. confirmed. "The same person. It has to be."

"So, where does that leave us?" Laura asked.

Celia made a sour face. "I vote we dump all this on Security and let them dig through Dr. Phillips' old class lists. He's been on campus forever!"

J.J. paused, chopsticks poised. "What would they look for, Celia?"

"I don't know. *You're* the psychiatrist."

"You think the torch is a former student?" Becky asked.

"A student or an ex-employee. It seems to fit." Laura put her carton down. "Who else would know the offices, the lab, and the classrooms Jake used to use four years ago and yet not know he isn't here this year?" She paused. "I said classrooms. J.J., did you get a list of all the classrooms Jake taught in?"

"No, I was just trying to find a match for what we had. Why?"

"Because Celia's right. We don't know if this person knew Jake from four years ago or longer still. Jake's been here a long time and has taught in a lot of classrooms. Including what became this office."

J.J. nodded thoughtfully. "Well, then, it's a good thing Corey and I will be camping out in the sleep lab tonight. Since we've all decided that the torch might shift the pattern to every other day," he told Becky, "Laura and I thought the best alibi for Corey would be if he's here."

"Especially with Sanders around," Celia added. "He's the one who set Security on Corey in the first place."

"Security didn't mention that to me." Becky glanced at Corey, who shrugged at her.

J.J. shook his head. "Security wouldn't. Professional nonbias and all that. But, you and Celia did find out that the torch usually sets the fires in early morning or late evening, which means Corey doesn't have to skip any more classes."

"I just have to move in here until they catch this guy." Corey glanced toward the doors and Becky realized who was the owner of the suitcases-and-backpacks obstacle course.

"Or until we get Sanders off your case," Celia amended, "and that won't take too long."

"Oh no?" Corey gestured at the calendar. "Since we had a fire today —"

"They think it was set late last night," Becky inserted. "Poor choice of combustibles."

Corey recalculated. "— the next one might be tomorrow evening, or the morning after, or the evening after. Or even the week after next!"

"Which gives you plenty of time to work on your extra credit paper," J.J. pointed out, "since you'll have easy access to the data base."

"Oh." Grinning, Corey exchanged glances with Celia, then looked almost possessively at the terminal on Laura's desk. Laura nodded to herself. A definite Parapsychology major in the making.
"What does your Security say about this plan?" Becky asked.

Laura grinned. "We thought we'd let the official investigator tell them."

Becky sighed. "Can I tell them what we've discovered?"

"Sure." J.J. smiled conspiratorily at Corey and Laura. "If they let us have a walkie-talkie, we can even let them know the second we know about a fire."

Becky glanced at the walkie-talkie Security had given her and looked suspiciously at Celia, who was doing her best to look elsewhere.

"We've got room for more," Laura suggested.

Becky frowned at the department chair. "You're going to be in this 'campout', too?"

"Wouldn't miss it. But Celia and I will be joining tomorrow night."

Becky sighed. "Okay, tomorrow night."

"Great!" Laura disposed of her carton, then started up the steps to her desk. "Now that that's settled, I need to get *some* work done while I still have access to my computer."

"Uh, Professor Wingate?" Corey asked hesitantly. "Could I use your computer tonight to work on my English paper?"

* * *

Corey yawned widely as he stared at the computer screen. "Get some sleep, Corey," J.J. suggested, glancing up from his stack of student papers. "The sleep lab is all yours; I'll be at this awhile and I'm used to the couches in here."

Corey rubbed his eyes and glanced at his watch. Ten o'clock. "No, that's okay. I just haven't been getting much sleep lately. Been having nightmares the last few nights."

"About fire?" J.J. asked casually.

Corey nodded. "About when I got this —" he rubbed his scar. "The thing is, I never really remembered much about what happened. And now I keep seeing bits and pieces."

"What *did* happen?"

"My mom told me we were visiting my aunt. One of my cousins decided to play with matches — at least that's what the firefighters told her. The fire killed my cousins and my aunt, but the firefighters saved me." Corey shook his head. "I don't even remember what my cousins looked like."

"Some people can't remember much of what happened when they were five. What do you remember now?"

Corey sighed and looked into his memory. "Kids screaming. The firefighters — I can even see the sleeve of the one who carried me out. Flames and smoke. Waking up in the hospital bed." He raised his hand to his scar again. "Pain. And ... a voice."

"Whose voice? What does it say?"

Corey shook his head. "I don't remember who. And it just says, 'Show me, coz.' Over and over again." He looked up and wondered when Professor Stillman had crossed the room to stand by the desk.

"Do you think it might be the voice of one of your cousins?"

"It could be. It must be. And 'show me' — do you think they were testing my sense of fire? Do you think that's what caused the fire?" He stared at J.J., his eyes stricken. "A dumb kid's game?"

"And you started remembering this when? Before or after you came to us? After?" At Corey's nod, J.J. sat in a chair beside the desk. "Then that's it. Our testing reminded you of your cousins' tests and now you're remembering what you forgot."

Corey closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, his voice was normal again. "But what about the laughter? Why do I feel that fire is laughing at me? It doesn't sound human, not like the voice, so it's not the ghost of my cousin, like Becky, I mean, Miss Fullman's father."

"Ah. You've read her file in the data base."

Corey nodded. "She talked to me about it, too, just to let me know that I'm not the only one who's ever been blamed for causing fires. She had it rough, with her father being a torch and all."

"Yeah, she did." The professor grinned suddenly. "Did she tell you that when Laura tested her, she tried to put out the fire with her bare hands?" When Corey stared at him, he continued, "She didn't repeat what the fire was saying to her at the time, but that was her response."

Corey stared at the wire baskets and could almost see the blonde firefighter throttling a flame. "I'm not that brave." He took a deep breath. "Celia said I should just ask you to hypnotize me — give me a posthypnotic suggestion to control my fear."

"Celia." J.J. looked upwards with a sigh, then rubbed the back of his neck. "It doesn't always work that way, Corey. With a fear as deep-seated as yours, all I can do is take the edge off it, let you see past it. *You* have to take control. And you have been. Remember how well you did detecting fire when you meditated?"

"I did, didn't I?" Corey agreed.

"We can run through a few meditation exercises tonight, see which ones you are more comfortable with." J.J. studied the computer screen. "Hey, you're almost done with your extra credit paper! Good job!"

Corey looked at his conclusion with a mixture of pride and disappointment. "Yeah, but I can't prove it."
"Prove what?"

"Well, I've determined —"

"You've definitely been hanging around Celia too long," the professor groaned.

Corey glanced curiously at him. "— after going through all the literature on dowsing and all the reported cases, that my ability isn't too different from regular dowsing. So anyone should be able to do it."

"With the proper frame of mind." J.J. looked at the counter of wire baskets. "While we're all waiting tomorrow evening, I have an idea for a little test."

* * *

"I don't like this!" Becky said as Laura attached the electrodes to her temples. She twisted to glare at Corey, who was seated beside her and also festooned with electrodes. "I don't care if it *was* your idea!"

Laura smiled reassuringly. "It's nothing too different from what you've done before, Becky. Corey and J.J. just decided that, with your previous affinity to fire, you'd be the best choice."

"Please?" Corey asked. "It would really help my paper."

Becky looked searchingly at him, then closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, all right." She opened her eyes to glare at J.J. "But only a few times. That's all." Corey grinned at her and she sighed again. "What do I do?"

"We hold hands," Corey said, extending his.

She closed her hand about his but had to ask, "Why?"

"This is just a basic test," J.J. said, settling himself opposite them, "to see if direct contact might help trigger the ability."

"It won't be so bad," Corey reassured her. "You see, unlike your previous ability, where you actually saw the fire and its surroundings, I just *know* where fire is. That's all dowsing is — an awareness of a particular substance."

J.J. held up his ring. "Corey is going to meditate, to close out any outside distractions — including the laughter, Corey. Becky, you can do the same, or simply close your eyes and try to think of nothing."

Becky closed her eyes. "And then what?"

"I'll ask you to tell me where the fire is. The diagram is right under your hand, Becky. Tell me where the fire is...now."

This was ridiculous, Becky told herself. She wasn't going to be able to detect fire, any more than she had the last time she had tried this test. It wasn't something you could turn off and on like ... A roaring *whoosh* suddenly sounded behind her and she shot to her feet, slamming her hand down on the table as she rose.

"You did it!" Laura beamed at her. J.J. seemed stunned.

Becky stared at Laura, then looked down at her hand. It was covering the second diagram and, turning, she could see the burner in the second basket blazing silently.

Corey blinked. "You let go," he said accusingly.

Becky looked from her hand to the fire. "It ... took me by surprise." She sat down and grasped Corey's hand. "I want to try that again."

She closed her eyes and shut out the sound of J.J. talking to Corey. The roar of the flames was already there in her mind, but it seemed fainter this time, more distant. She reached out for the diagram, then paused. No, that wasn't it. She pawed across the table, blindly seeking something that felt right in her hand. When she did, she opened her eyes and found that what she was pointing at was not the diagram but instead a rough floorplan of the Life Sciences building.

"He's here," J.J. said, glancing at his watch. "Quarter to ten. The night classes will be letting out soon. If we pull the fire alarm, we could lose him in the crowd."

"No." Becky pulled the electrodes off herself.

Laura caught up one of the fire extinguishers by the door to the office. "We'll let Security decide." She glanced at the floorplan. "Celia, tell them it's Room 408." As Celia spoke into the walkie-talkie, Laura continued, "J.J., you and Corey had better stay here. Becky, it's two floors up and across the building from here."

"I'm on it." Standing, Becky shook her head to clear it, then turned to Celia. "I'll need the walkie-talkie." She thumbed it as soon as it was in her grasp. "This is Fullman. We're heading out to the fire. I'll relay what we find if we get there first."

"Roger," came the brisk reply.

"Hey, what about me?" Celia asked as Laura and Becky went through the office and out the doors.

"Get me the smelling salts!" J.J. ordered. "Corey!" He caught the student as Corey slumped forward.

* * *

As quick as they were, there was no one in the hallway as they neared Room 408. "He's repeating himself," Laura commented, pointing out the burn at the bottom of the office door.

Becky tried the knob. "Locked," she commented. The door had several panes of frosted glass in the upper quarter. One was broken, and she looked through the small opening. Thumbing the walkie-talkie, she relayed, "The fire is confined to the top of the desk at the moment. The door is locked. If you don't get here soon with a key, I'm going to have to break in."

* * *

"Those sudden breaks in contact are why you're so dizzy, Corey," J.J. said reassuringly, as he sat back on his heels. "Just give yourself a moment to recover. Oh, and congratulations on a successful experiment."

"It worked, didn't it," Corey said wonderingly. He laid back on the floor and looked fuzzily at the ceiling.

"Careful," Celia warned as she placed the remaining electrodes atop the console, "you still might get stuck writing up the report on the experiment."

"True," J.J. commented. "A good researcher always does his — or her —" he nodded to Celia, "— own followup. But this time, Celia will help you."

Celia nodded sagely. "What did I tell you? Hey!" She glared at J.J. as his words sank in.

J.J. ignored her, glancing instead at the office doors. "The hard part might be getting Becky to give you her full impressions of the experiment," he mused.

Corey sat up. "Do you smell smoke?" Climbing to his feet with J.J.'s assistance, he looked through the window at the burners.

Celia sniffed. "I don't smell any smoke."

J.J. watched him. "Are you still aware of the fire, Corey?"

He nodded. "But there's something else, something faintly crackling and smoky ... and moving! It's coming for me!"

J.J. caught him. "No, Corey! That's the five-year-old talking. Fire is not coming for you. You're sensing something else."

Corey shook his head in an attempt to straighten out his impressions. "Yeah. Something connected with fire."

"He's sensing the torch!" Celia guessed.

"I think so," J.J. agreed. "Corey, where is he?"

Corey turned to the table and stared at the floorplan. "About here," he said, pointing.

"On this floor," J.J. observed. "That's why you can sense him. Celia, take the closest stairs. Go warn Laura and Becky. Get Security down here."

Celia started toward the door, then stopped. "But what are you going to do?"

J.J. glanced again at the floorplan. "We're going to find him. Right, Corey?"

Corey stiffened, his eyes widening. He caught Celia's arm as she started again for the door. "No! He's coming closer! He's coming here!"

"But there aren't any stairs in this end of the floor," Celia countered. "Why would he be coming here?"

"He's changing the pattern!" J.J. surmised. He examined the floorplan. "Yes! Look, he already tried burning Room 408 back in August."

"So why do it again?" Celia asked.

"You can ask him yourself," Corey suggested, staring through the window of the lab out at the office doors. "He's just about at the doors."

"He's what?" J.J. looked towards the frosted glass of the office doors. "Get down!" he ordered as a faint shadow became visible.

They crouched below the level of the window. Seconds ticked by, then Corey whispered, "He's very close. He must be in the office."

"Okay," J.J. said softly, "I'm going to go out that door —" he pointed to the door leading to the hallway, "— and come around to the office doors. Celia, you work your way to the phone and call Security."

They all jumped as the building's fire alarm suddenly sounded. "It's from the other fire," Corey whispered under the noise. "He hasn't started one here yet."

"We're ready when he does," Celia reminded him, indicating the remaining fire extinguishers by the burner controls.

Through the lab door, left open when Laura and Becky had departed, they could hear the scrape of moving furniture. J.J. clapped Corey on the shoulder. "You be ready for fire, too," he ordered. Corey nodded, and J.J. began edging his way to the door at the back of the lab, careful to keep the lab's furnishings between himself and the window.

"I hope he remembers to unlock the door first," Celia muttered.

* * *

Laura watched through the door as Becky and a member of Security blanketed the desktop with clouds of chemical extinguisher. The computer looked like it was going to be a total loss. The fire alarm, triggered by smoke detectors when Security had unlocked the door, buzzed overhead. "How did he start the fire from out here?" she wondered aloud.

"No *normal* person could," the Security officer beside her commented.

"But someone who could start fires with his mind could. Where was our suspect?"

Laura bristled, but Becky, having satisfied herself that the fire was out, had also heard and stepped in first. "There's no mystery about how this was done." She glanced from the broken pane to the desk. "I suggest you concentrate on finding something about —" she measured with her hands, "— this long —" She paused, her blue eyes widening as she stared into space.

"Becky?" Laura asked, concerned. She suddenly realized what was happening. "Becky, what do you see?"

Becky's voice was distant. "He's started another fire."

Laura caught up the fire extinguisher Becky had put down. "Can you tell me where, Becky? Describe what you see."

The firefighter shook her head, and her eyes seemed to see Laura again. "The office. *Your* office." She caught Laura's arm. "What did he do to me? I don't need this ability again!"

Static crackled from the walkie-talkie at her hip. "Base here. We've got a call about the arsonist. Woman says he's in the Department of Parapsychology office."

Laura shook herself free from the taller woman's grasp. "Take that up with us later. Right now we've got another fire."

"Yeah, and we know who started it," the Security officer muttered.

* * *

"Yes, it's me again," Celia snapped into the phone. "The arsonist is now in the hallway — and if you guys don't hurry up he'll be out of the building!"

Corey stood in the lab doorway, staring at the fire greedily licking the fabric of the couch. Images flashed through his mind: two young black boys — one somehow taller than himself, the other his height — both very familiar, the toy-strewn interior of an apartment, a blazing couch. His grip tightened on the fire extinguisher Celia had pushed into his hands.

"No, I'm not going to try to stop him," Celia argued behind him, still on the phone. "I've got a fire to put out here!"

"Daniel," Corey said slowly, pulling the name out of the fire's laughter. "Andy. The fire is in the couch. That's where you hid it." The fire's crackling laughter surged upwards, as the flames swept up the back of the couch in the office just as it had done to the couch in his memory, taunting him with his inability to move. Something stirred within him in response to the laughter, a swirl of anger he'd never felt before.

The crackling laughter in his mind seemed to hesitate as the anger grew. He became aware of cool metal filling his hands. Corey looked blankly at the fire extinguisher in his arms, the trigger placed precisely in his hand. He looked at the flame covered couch, heard the mocking laughter of the fire, and the anger within him snarled in response. He squeezed the controls.

* * *

"I'm not going to hurt you," J.J. repeated, holding his empty hands up where the torch could see them. He resisted the impulse to glance again through the partly closed office doors behind the man. The last glimpse he had, Corey was standing staring at the fire and Celia was nowhere to be seen. He concentrated on reading the face and body language of the man before him, hoping at the same time that Celia had reached Security and that reinforcements were on the way. "I just want to talk to you."

"Oh?" The man looked down the empty hallway then slyly back at J.J. "What about?"

"About ... fires," J.J. drawled out, his tone steady and calming. He was very glad that the still buzzing fire alarm had cleared out the normal end-of-class hallway confusion faster than usual. He didn't like the glitter in this man's eyes.

The man chuckled. "Oh, is that what that racket is all about? No, I'm just here for a night class." From his casual attire, he could be a student, although his apparent age suggested either a graduate student or simply one of the older, nontraditional students.

J.J. studied the rain-wet jacket that should have been dry after a two-hour class but decided to comment on something more obvious. "Where are your books? Don't you find it hard to keep notes without even a notebook?"

The man glared at him. "I keep excellent notes. I keep my notes —" he gestured toward his forehead, "— up here."

"I see," J.J. commented. "Did you get good grades that way?"

The casual question struck a nerve. "What do you know about my grades?" the arsonist demanded. "You talked to my boss, didn't you. Well, I'll show him. Giving me an 'F'. He can't do that."

"Your boss?" J.J. asked in confusion.

"No, not my boss. Phillips! Where is he? I've been looking for him in all his usual places. He's hiding from me, isn't he? Afraid to face me."

"Phillips gave you an 'F'?" J.J. deciphered. This didn't fit the Jake he'd been hearing about lately from Laura and Celia. This student's work must have been pretty bad to have earned an 'F' from easy-going Phillips. "Couldn't you have done some extra credit work?"

"You don't understand," the torch sneered. "He flunked me. He branded me a failure. Nobody wants to hire a failure. He has to change my grade!"

"I thought you said you had a job."

The man blinked. "Of course I have a job," he said in a different voice.

"Then why are you setting the fires?" J.J. asked slowly.

"Don't you understand? If he doesn't change that 'F', then my records must be purified. Nobody wants to hire a failure," he repeated distantly. Drawing a lighter from his jacket pocket, he lit it and studied the yellow flame. Adjusting the flame higher, he raised his gaze to J.J. and smiled.

Suddenly one of the office doors swung outward, slamming into the torch's side and sending him stumbling toward the opposite wall. J.J., surprised, turned to find Corey standing in the doorway, holding a fire extinguisher pointed at the floor before the slightly stunned torch. "Corey?" he marvelled, wondering at the change in the student.

"Geeze, Corey, it's only a lighter," Celia said from behind the freshman. J.J. looked to see what Corey was aiming at and was amused and reassured to see that the lighter, its flame having gone out when it was dropped, and not the torch was the focus of Corey's attention.

The torch, however, either didn't notice or was misled by Corey's intense expression. He flattened himself against the wall and raised empty hands. "Hey, be careful with that," he urged.

Movement at the end of the hallway caught J.J.'s attention. "Took them long enough," Celia commented as the Security people hurried towards them. "Laura looks worried, but Becky looks really angry. I wonder what happened?"

"We'll find out soon enough," J.J. replied pensively. He looked from Corey to Becky and realized where he had seen the expression on the freshman's face before.

"I called the Chief," Celia told the firefighter as she and Laura joined them. "He's on his way."

Becky waited as Security took charge of the torch and started down the hallway with him, trailing protests of "Where's Phillips? I have to talk to Dr. Phillips!" in their wake. Then she turned on J.J. and Corey. "What did you do to me?!" she demanded.

* * *

"As near as I can tell without further testing," J.J. decided, studying the readouts, "contact with Corey re-activated your abilities. The readings are the same as when you first came to us." He rubbed his eyes. "Contact with *you*, on the other hand, awakened another ability in Corey. He could sense the torch.

Something of your attitude towards fire also seems to have been picked up — unless you were practicing a new meditation exercise, Corey?"

Corey shook his head vigorously, sending his dreadlocks bouncing. "Not me! I couldn't close it out of my mind at all! And the memories — when I saw the couch on fire I remembered everything from when this —" he pointed at the scar, "— happened. Everything! My cousins, their names — they hid the fire they were testing me with inside the couch ..." He fell silent as he looked again at the burned ruin inside the office.

"But *you* put out the fire, Corey," Laura reminded him. She gestured at the rest of the untouched office. "If meditation didn't help you, then how were you able to move against the fire?"

The student shrugged in confusion. "I ... guess I got angry."

"Angry!" Celia repeated. "That's like saying Rambo was upset."

"I remember Celia giving me the extinguisher. I remember staring at the fire." He looked down at his hands. "I don't know where the anger came from. I've never felt that way before — it was like the fire was something I had to kill."

"That sounds like Fullman, all right," the Chief said from the open doorway. "*She* kills fires. So you picked up some of her attitude and now you can sense torches. That's a very impressive talent you have."

Laura shook her head. "No need to ask how long you've been standing there." The phone rang, and she headed for the closest. "It's probably Security wondering why we haven't turned up to give our statements. Yes," she said into the receiver, "he's finally arrived, so we'll be right over."

"Statements?" the Chief asked. "You caught him?"

Becky nodded. "Corey and J.J. did. Corey put out the fire the torch started here."

The Chief walked over to the lab window to stare at the blackened couch. "I think I'm going to enjoy making Fleming realize just how wrong he can be."

* * *

"So, the torch actually did graduate from here?" Celia asked a few days later.

J.J. nodded. "Five years ago. Name's Bob Wilson. According to his medical records, he's been diagnosed schizophrenic. That will probably be taken into consideration at his trial." He joined in the applause of the Parapsychology students as Corey and Becky entered the office. "How did the award ceremony go?"

The two glanced at each other as Celia handed them glasses of punch, and Becky shrugged. "It went all right. The Chief was paged in the middle of the mayor's talk and I'm not sure if anyone understood what your president talked about —"

"Nobody ever does," Laura said drily.

"Oh. But Dean Fleming gave a very nice introduction — and an apology — for Corey."

Corey grinned. "He said I was an inspiration to students on civic duty." He glanced at the table of food. "Nice cake! They spelled my name right."

"So let's see the letter of commendation," Celia prompted.

Blushing, Corey handed her the framed letter. "They should have given it to you," he said.

"Me?" She scanned the letter. "It says 'for courage and quick thinking' — nope, nothing here about arguing on the phone." Other students crowded around her to admire the award.

Laura raised her glass to him. "It's never any good arguing with Celia."

Corey grinned. "I think the Chief wants me to join the fire department after I graduate," he said, watching as the award got passed to another group. "He said a Parapsychology major would be okay."

"If that's what you want," Laura said, pleased at his choice of major. Sometimes you *could* predict a possible major from the first reaction to the office.

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